

FAWCETT
GOLD MEDAL

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SABREHILL

RAYMOND GILES

author of DARK MASTER and ROGUE BLACK



**JEB WAS
JUST ONE SLAVE
AMONG MANY.**

**BUT HE WAS
A MAN NO ONE
COULD IGNORE.**

SABREHILL

RAYMOND GILES

Women noticed Jeb. Men envied him. With his lean, muscular body and a flash of arrogance in his face, Jeb made heads turn when he strode by. Jeb knew what he had going for him. But he wanted more. He wanted his freedom. And he would have it—or die trying to get it.

But Jeb's plan changed. Amity Sabre took charge of the plantation, and life at Sabrehill became a nightmare. The dream of freedom faded. Jeb became obsessed by his hatred for Amity and his forbidden love for her sister, Dulcy.

They entered the dark house, and Dulcy locked the door behind them. Jebediah found that he was oddly frightened as he was with no other woman. It had nothing to do with the fact that she was white . . . if that was what she was. It had purely to do with the fact that she was . . . Dulcy.

"I care," Jebediah said. "You must know."

Dulcy whispered something; he couldn't make out the words. But the words didn't matter. He lifted her, cradled her in his arms, and carried her to the bed.

Sabrekill

Raymond Giles

FAWCETT GOLD MEDAL  NEW YORK

For Maggie

SABREHILL

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One

The chase was over, and once again he had lost. His pursuers had caught him between a coachhouse and a barn, men on horseback and on foot at each end of the broad passageway. He saw them dimly in the flickering torchlight as they began to close in on him. His lungs ached, and his legs trembled with fatigue.

"Don't hurt him if you don't have to," a voice called out. "Hold back those dogs. Jeb, you had enough of a run?"

It was Mr. Turnage, his overseer, somewhere in the darkness beyond the torches. Jeb didn't answer.

"You ain't gonna give us no more trouble, now, Jeb, are you?"

As if he could. After four days and nights, virtually without sleep. After a hundred hours of running through woods, swamps, fields. Until that very night, he had eluded pursuit, or so he had thought, and he had no idea of who or what had given him away. He had traveled slowly and cautiously during the day and tried to make

time only after dark. He had managed to dodge the slave patrols, and he had used his false pass only once. Twice he had stopped at slave quarters for food and rest. There was always the chance that the black drivers or the house servants would inform on him, but he had tried to stay out of their sight.

Yet someone had spotted him, someone had suspected him, perhaps for the very reason that he had favored out-of-the-way places, wooded and uncultivated land. Riders had carried word of a runaway, and someone had thought, *There go a nigger who ain't where he should be.* And at last he had heard distant shouts in the darkness and the barking of dogs, and he had known they were on his trail. He had destroyed the forged pass, which would have earned him extra punishment, and taken to the streams, risking cottonmouth and copperhead, in a last futile attempt to lose the dogs and gain his freedom.

But they had him now, a circle of men slowly closing in on him. Their faces became clearer in the torchlight—white faces and a few black. The circle became smaller, smaller, as Jeb turned and looked each way, seeking an escape that wasn't there, staring back at the wary eyes and the tense, excited grins. The hunt had become a sport at the end, but the hunters had no idea of how dangerous the prey might be.

For a moment the circle stopped closing in, and the hunters looked with wide unblinking eyes at Jeb as if measuring his size and his potential for violence.

"Easy now, boy," Mr. Turnage said quietly, soothingly. "Easy now. Just stand easy. Ain't nobody gonna hurt you. You just stand easy, boy."

As if he were a dog.

Nothing but a dog, but a dog that could be whipped to tameness and taught to perform labor like a man. A dog worth money, to be traded, bought, sold. For years now he had been nothing but a dog, and unless he broke free—

Rage welled up at the very moment they rushed him, and with rage came a burst of new strength. Resistance was futile, even suicidal, yet he had to resist. If he did

not, he might find himself at last accepting the white masters' verdict—that he was an animal, or part-animal, inferior, hardly human, a thing to be shackled and shipped, harnessed to a barge, hitched to a plow, worked like any other beast of burden. If ever he ceased to resist, he might never find the will to resist again.

And so, as the crowd rushed toward him, he raced to meet it. He seized the nearest white man and threw him against another. He whirled and struck out with a rock-like fist and heard a howl of pain. Startled, the crowd milled, and he went after it. As a horseman came plunging through, he grasped the man's leg and threw him from the saddle. He swung an arm like a beam, like a scythe, and felt flesh and bone yield. The mob screamed, "Get him! Get him!", and still he went after it. A horse reared and whinnied; he dodged flailing hooves. Someone landed on his back and clung like a cat, but Jeb shrugged him off, sent him flying.

But four days and nights had taken their toll. When another climbed on his back and others took him from each side, his burst of strength began to fade. He struck out, but his fists hit nothing, and both arms were captured. He felt himself going down. Something slammed against his head with a force that blinded him, then slammed him again. His arms went limp, his knees buckled. Another blow seemed to take the top of his head off, and he fell into dark oblivion.

Being lifted by his arms . . . lifted and dragged . . . dragged through darkness. . . .

". . . knew he was no good soon's I seen him. Fancy nigger. Fancy niggers is never no good." Turnage's voice: oily, nasal, with a frequent complaining twang. Now victorious, smugly self-assured.

"He sure is a big boy, though. Ought to make a mighty fine field hand." Another voice: deeper, grittier.

"Lazy son-of-a-bitch. Anyway, not wide enough in the butt to be first-class, Doak. First-class field hand should have plenty o' butt and gut."

"Maybe so, but look at those shoulders and that chest.

Damn good legs, too. And he's sure good-looking, for a nigger. Don't know as I ever seen a better-looking nigger in my life."

"That don't hoe no cotton."

The darkness faded. Light pressed against Jeb's eyelids and his head throbbed. Fetid barn smells, stale hay, and animal waste filled his nostrils. His ankles and wrists seemed to be bound, though he had no memory of being tied. Harness jingled distantly, and voices called farewells: the mob that had chased him down was dispersing. Involuntarily Jeb groaned.

"Jeb? Jeb, boy? You awake?"

"He ain't awake, friend. Not the way he got laid out. He's lucky his head ain't broke."

"It's gonna get broke 'fore I'm done with him."

"You shoulda let us whip him—raising his hand against white men like that. Long as I been overseer here, I never allowed that. Black boy attacks a white man, he's best strung up."

"Course he is, but you try telling the Sabres that. Don't you worry, though. I get him back to Sabrehill, I'm gonna whip hell outa him and teach *all* our niggers their goddam lesson."

Some lip-smacking and heavy sighs signified that a jug was being passed back and forth. The throbbing in Jeb's head extended itself to the rest of his body, but he kept his eyes closed and didn't move.

"How many times he run?" Doak asked.

"Just this once I know of. But he was only at Sabrehill a week. One week, and then we're four days searching for him. I was just lucky, the way he mighty near ran right into my hands."

"And you say his name's Jeb?"

"Jeb Hayes."

Doak's chuckle was derisive.

"Something funny about that?"

"Where'd you get him? The Wingate plantation?"

"Got him from a Charleston slave trader. Name of Avery."

"It figures. Friend, it 'pears to me your employers done

got took. If this here is the Jeb Hayes I think he is, he was on the Wingate plantation a couple of years, and he musta run away at least two or three times. Now, I know Wingate, and I figure he knows how to handle his people, but that didn't keep your Jeb here from running."

"Goddam. You mean he's run away maybe four, five times, all told?"

"For all I know, he's run away even more than that. Which means he'll always be a runner."

"Well, goddam," Turnage said after a moment, "I can cure that."

"Ain't only one thing can cure a runner, and that's geld him. You geld this boy, he'll settle down then, all right."

"The Sabres won't do that. Joel Sabre just might, you get him mad enough, but old Aaron's so soft he'd make you puke."

"You don't geld him, he's gonna breed, and runners breed more runners. You don't want him to breed if he's a runner."

"You don't have to tell me."

Again there was the sound of a jug being passed. Then boots shuffled over the floor, and a hard toe prodded Jeb's ribs.

"Jeb! You, boy!"

Jeb slowly opened his eyes. Lamplight dazzled him for a few seconds before he made out his overseer's lean, bony face. High cheekbones and a strong jaw gave Turnage a kind of rugged handsomeness, but now he had several days' growth of beard, and his mustache was untrimmed and ragged. His eyes often had a wavering, uncertain look that went with his querulous voice, but now they were meanly triumphant.

Grinning, he leaned down over Jeb. "Been learning about you, boy. Been learning this ain't the first time you ran off. You ever gonna learn you can't get away?"

No.

"You ever gonna stop trying?"

Never.

"All that running," Doak said, "just to get his hide whaled off. Ain't it a shame?"

"How come you run off, boy? How come you kept us looking for you all this time? Didn't we treat you right at Sabrehill?"

Jeb kept his mouth shut, his face impassive.

"You see that?" Turnage said to Doak. "He knows lots of big long words, Jeb does. You'd think he was Harvard educated. But he don't know what to answer. I don't think he got a brain in his head."

"Course not. Otherwise he wouldn't have run all them times. He can't help it if he's not smart enough to learn better. He's a runner. It's in the blood."

Turnage laughed. "Well, now, I figure it a bit different. I figure he ran to oblige me. I figure he ran 'cause he knew I wanted him to run."

"*Wanted him to run?*"

"Course. Doak, take a good look at this here nigger. You musta seen his kind before. Me, I take one look at him, and I know what kind he is."

"And what kind is that?" Doak asked, chuckling, playing along.

"Proud. Oh, he is truly proud, he is. Thinks he's some kinda Masai warrior or Mandingo prince, ain't that right, Jeb? Thinks he can look down his goddam nose at a white man, just because all the wenches come sniffing around him, and he's got them big Harvard words. Too goddam good to work in the fields, too smart to get down on his knees, too tough to be broken. Proud. You just look at this big black bastard, and you know it.

"So my job is to whip that out of him, and he done kindly give me an excuse. He ran. So now I'm gonna take him back to Sabrehill and whip him like he never been whipped before. And then I'm gonna put him back in the fields and work his ass so bad he's gonna run again, and I'm gonna catch him and beat the living Christ out of him worse'n ever."

Turnage dropped down on one knee beside Jeb. His voice was almost jovial. "And it's gonna go on and on, slave boy, long as you last. 'Cause you're the kind of swell-headed, useless nigger that I purely hate. And if I work and run and whip the bejesus out of the likes of

you, I sure as hell ain't gonna have any trouble with the others."

As Turnage leaned closer, Jeb felt his mouth begin to work.

"And if you want to get out of that, boy, here's what you got to do. You hang your head, bend your back, and work like hell. And remember you're a nigger. *Just a nigger*. And out in the fields or in the quarters, you're not Mr. Aaron's nigger and Mr. Joel's nigger—you're *my* nigger. You never make a move without asking me, and you show you're grateful for all you get. And if you ever look down that snotty nose of yours at *me*, boy, or at any other white man, I'll pound it off your face with a whip butt. And then I'll run you off and whip you into your grave. You understand what I'm saying, Jeb?"

Jeb didn't answer. He couldn't. His mouth continued to work, gathering saliva. He didn't know if he meant to spit or not—it could cost him his life—but he couldn't help himself. He was mad, he supposed, but his madness was his only hope of salvation, and he couldn't help it if the madness burned in his eyes like a furious pride, a weapon, a threat.

As suddenly as he had knelt, Turnage was back on his feet, retreating from Jeb, and there was something like fear in his eyes. "You bastard," he muttered. "You stinking black bastard."

Jeb smiled. And swallowed.

Doak chuckled softly.

The wagon was driven by one of Turnage's favorites, a field gang foreman, or driver, named Cheney. Cheney, short and rock-bodied, a bull of a man with the scars of a dozen battles on his face and bald skull, had taken a dislike to Jeb the moment he detected a note of "house-nigger talk" in the latter's speech. As a result, Jeb had felt Cheney's whip at least a half-dozen times a day thereafter—with Turnage's full approval. Now Cheney periodically turned to look back at Jeb and jeer at him: "You gon' git it now, boy. Hope they let me lay it on you. You never git the whipping like I give it you now."

The wagon jounced and jogged over the sun-baked ruts of the road, and the Carolina sky turned to blue flame as the heat of the day came on. Turnage dozed in a forward corner of the wagon, his saddle horse trailing behind. Jeb, still tightly bound, tried to lose himself in sleep in a back corner, but failed. His body ached from the beating he had taken, his pounding head felt as if it might explode. He had been given neither food nor water, and his mouth was painfully dry. In the middle of the morning he began to retch over the side of the wagon, but there was nothing in his stomach to throw up, nothing to give relief. Turnage roused up slightly and grinned, and Cheney's laughter was rich with pleasure.

They reached Sabrehill late in the afternoon. It seemed bitterly unfair to Jeb that in four days of running he had succeeded in going such a short distance.

Aside from the slave quarters and the fields, he had seen very little of the plantation before, except at considerable distance. The great brick mansion, two and a half stories crowned with a cupola, lay atop a gentle rise, facing south on a river. Jeb guessed from experience that there would be some kind of pillared piazza on that side. The visitors' approach was from the north, and that was the way Turnage directed Cheney to drive the wagon, rather than taking a back road to the slave quarters. They turned off of the east-west road, entered an open gateway, and followed a broad oak-shaded avenue up the rise. At the head of the avenue stood the mansion and a circular courtyard on which grazed half a dozen sheep. A number of outbuildings, blindingly white in the sun, winged out from the mansion on each side, northeast and northwest, and the two closest were connected to corners of the mansion by porticoes. One of these buildings would be the big-house kitchen, so Jeb guessed the one they were heading for to be the plantation office.

"Get him down."

Cheney followed Turnage's order, dragging Jeb from the back of the wagon and dropping him to the ground. Gravel dug painfully into a hip and an elbow.

Mr. Joel Sabre appeared in the office doorway. "Finally got him, did you?" he said with satisfaction.

"Oh, he led us a real chase, Mr. Joel, sir," Turnage said heartily. "Wasn't even sure it was him was seen running until the very end. Finally cornered him on the plantation of a man named Dawson. Slave patrol up there got out the dogs, and neighbors from all around helped out. Regular coon hunt, it was. Never seen nothing like it."

Joel Sabre walked over and stared down at Jeb. It was the first time Jeb had seen his master since his purchase, a humiliating process in which he had first been stripped naked, and then handled, prodded, and probed like an animal. Mr. Joel was about fifty and going to gray, but he had a vigorous air and the weathered face of an outdoor man. His bare forearms suggested that his chunky body was more muscle than fat.

"Come to find out something about this boy," Turnage said. "He's just a natural runaway. Run away lotsa times before we bought him."

"Coulda guessed that. What's his name? I forgot."

"Jeb. Jeb Hayes."

"That your name, Jeb?"

"Jebediah Hayes." Jeb said the name as distinctly as he could with his dry mouth, trying to put a hint of insolence into his voice. He purposely failed to say "sir," but for once no one seemed to notice.

"You know what happens to runaways, Jeb?"

Jeb stared directly into Joel Sabre's eyes without answering.

"I asked you a question, boy."

"I'm sorry, master, sir," Jeb said, "but I thought the question was rhetorical."

"You thought—*great God almighty!*" Joel burst out laughing. "Hey, Aaron!" he shouted. "Aaron, you come out here! We got us an educated nigger on our hands!" He laughed again, and Turnage grinned.

The man who must have been Aaron Sabre appeared in the doorway of the office. Jeb had never seen him before. He was taller and leaner than Joel Sabre, and his hair was completely white, though he didn't look much older than his brother. He came out into the courtyard and around the wagon to look at Jeb. He stared down for a

moment without smiling, and the other two men's grins faded.

"Why is he tied up?" he asked quietly after a moment. "Why have you left him lying here on the ground?"

"Why, because he's a runaway is why, Mr. Aaron," Turnage said, mildly patronizing. "He's tied up because he's a runaway, and he's lying there because we just got here and ain't done nothing with him yet."

Aaron turned unsmiling gray eyes on Turnage. For a few seconds he didn't speak—as if taking a moment to inspect the overseer's untidy soul. Then, with distaste, as if he didn't like what he had seen, he said, "Well, untie him. Now."

"Cheney," Turnage said grudgingly, his eyes on Aaron, "untie this here nigger."

Cheney speedily did as he was told, and blood began to flow more freely through Jeb's hands and feet. So great was his general discomfort that he hadn't noticed how numb they had become. He struggled to climb to his feet but failed until Aaron ordered Cheney to help him. He swayed, staggered a step or two, swayed again. He managed to hold his head high in spite of the pounding ache.

Aaron observed him with an odd, speculative gaze. "So you're Jebediah Hayes," he said thoughtfully. "You look ill, Jebediah. Are you?"

"I am tired and thirsty," Jeb said. "And hungry, I think. Master. Sir."

Something flickered in Aaron Sabre's eyes. *White bastard.*

"When did you last have food and water?"

"I don't know."

"Sir!" Turnage said.

"Sir."

"You were caught—"

"Early this morning, Mr. Aaron," Turnage said quickly. "On the Dawson plantation. I tell you, it was quite a thing to see—"

"And you've not yet given him anything to eat or drink?" Aaron asked mildly. "Why not?"

"He's a runaway, Mr. Aaron. He had good food and

water here, and he ran away from it. Couldn't hurt him none to go without both till he got back."

"Mr. Turnage is right, Aaron," Joel Sabre said, and Aaron turned his eyes for a moment on *his* soul. It was the first time Joel had spoken since Aaron had appeared, and that told Jeb something. Aaron Sabre, not Joel, ran Sabrehill.

Aaron turned back to Jeb. "Why did you run away?"

The question was too absurd to answer. He was a slave, whipped daily until the agony was unbearable. What else was he to do but run away?

Turnage started to order Jeb to answer, but Aaron cut the overseer off with a wave of his hand.

"Were you running back to your family, Jebediah?"

"I have none, sir."

"No mother or father?"

"They are dead."

"No sweetheart? No brothers or sisters?"

Jeb said nothing. No further answer was necessary.

Aaron lifted Jeb's right hand with his own. He held it palm up and touched the calluses, while Jeb gazed into space. He released the hand, not dropping it but, almost respectfully, putting it back where it had hung.

"I was not here when you were purchased, Jebediah," he said, "but from your speech, the few words you've said, it's obvious you're not a field hand. Even with hands like yours. You were brought up as a house servant, weren't you? What happened?"

Since he couldn't possibly tell all that had happened to him, it was best to say as little as possible.

"I was sold. Four years ago."

"Why?"

"Debts."

"*Sir!*" Turnage corrected angrily.

"Sold for debts." Aaron looked at Jeb as if he were seeing beyond the simple statement, beyond the simple fact. "Sold into the field because you're big. Purchased here as a field hand." He gave his brother a disgusted look. "For Christ's sake, Joel!"

Joel looked startled.

"Didn't you realize this boy had been a house servant? Didn't you listen to him talk?"

"Well, of course I did."

"You know better than to put a house servant into the fields. You never do that except as a punishment."

"But you saw his hands, Aaron. He'd already been broken to the fields."

"Joel, you know how most field hands feel about house servants. The minute they heard house-talk coming out of this boy's mouth, they started giving him hell. Stole anything personal he had, put dirt into his food—"

"Now, Mr. Aaron," Turnage said soothingly, patronizingly, "now, you know a little hazing like that is only natural at first. It's only funning, and they get over it in a week or so—"

"It's not *funning*, Mr. Turnage, and it can go on for months or even years."

Aaron stepped around behind Jeb and pulled up the back of his shirt. Turnage and Joel seemed to hold their breath.

"Christ," Aaron said wearily.

Joel was defensive. "We got him for a bargain price because of those old marks."

"I'm looking at the new ones."

"Mr. Aaron," Turnage said nervously, "he put up quite a fight when we caught him. Couldn't help but mark him up some."

"Not all of these marks were made in the last twenty-four hours, Mr. Turnage, or even the last four days. Joel, were they there when you bought him?"

"Well, no—"

"Then he was cut with a whip after he got here and before he ran. You can tell by the stage of the healing. Mr. Turnage, you're responsible for this."

"Maybe the foreman did put it on him a little hard, Mr. Aaron, but if he don't do his work—"

"Then he gets whipped. But none of our people get cut like this unless I say so. What's the matter, Mr. Turnage, can't you control your foremen? Or did you do this personally?"

"I never laid a hand on him, Mr. Aaron! Not till early this morning." Turnage's eyes wavered.

Aaron dropped the back of Jeb's shirt. He walked slowly away from the others, paced, kicked gravel. Joel and Turnage watched him, neither speaking, as if awaiting a verdict. Finally Aaron turned to Jeb again.

"How old are you, Jebediah?"

"Twenty-two, sir."

"I'd have guessed older. You said you were sold four years ago. Brought up, eighteen years, a house servant?"

"Yes, sir."

"And a good one, I'll wager." Aaron turned away and paced another moment, paused, and dug his toe into the gravel. Shook his head reluctantly.

"Jebediah, I must have you whipped. I'm not sure how much you deserve it, but you did run away. And we can't have our people thinking they can run off with impunity. Do you know what impunity means?"

"I know what it means. Sir." Jeb tried to put contempt into his voice, but he was too weary and sick to do it well. Aaron gave him an amused, pitying look which at any other time would have infuriated him.

"At any rate, you'll have to be whipped. First, though, I want you to wash up and put on some fresh clothes. Then go to the big house and ask for Miss Lucy. Tell her I want to know if you'll do as a houseboy."

Turnage looked surprised, and Joel said, "What in tar-nation!"

"You have something to say, Joel?"

"Aaron, once when a houseboy ran away, you put him out in the fields as a punishment. Now we got a runaway field hand, and you're gonna put him into the *house*?"

"I thought we had established that Jebediah wasn't originally a field hand. And ever since old Eben died, Lucy has been without a butler—"

"Mr. Aaron," Turnage burst out, "putting this here boy into the house is just like giving him a reward for running away. How'm I s'posed to work your people when you do that?"

"With less brutality, Mr. Turnage, and fewer runaways.

I trust you can arrange that. Meanwhile, I want Jebediah to clean up and go see Miss Lucy."

"Baby soft," Cheney jeered as he led the way to a well that serviced the east outbuildings. "Gon' laze around the big house, eat white people food, think he too good for common nigger. I tell you something, boy. You big but you not tough enough to do real black man work. You work the big house, pretty soon you even stink like a white master."

Jeb ignored him. He had no real belief that he would ever again work in a plantation mansion. That was a dream of ease long lost. For now he was intent only on reaching the well and the relief of fresh, cool, comforting water.

"I smell white stink on you first day you here. I see you in the field, I think, 'House nigger!' I *smell* house nigger. Ain't nothing lower."

The effort of drawing up the bucket made Jeb's head pound harder, a painful explosive thudding, but then he had the bucket at his mouth, and he drew long draughts, knowing he should not be drinking so much. He couldn't help it. The water poured down his throat until at last he up-ended the bucket over his face.

"You answer me, I talk to you, nigger! You want more my whip? They ain't gon' see no new lash marks in the old."

"Cheney . . ."—Jeb turned and looked bleakly at the foreman—"Cheney, if you whip me right now, there's not much I can do about it. But you'd better not. Because if you do, sooner or later, by God, I'm going to kill you."

It was a wearily made threat, yet somehow more effective than if Jeb had had the strength to show anger. An uncertain look came into Cheney's eyes, and he didn't answer.

"You're supposed to get me clean clothes," Jeb went on. "Now, go get them quickly before I put a *voodoo bad-mout* on you."

Cheney obviously was not accustomed to receiving an order from another black, certainly not one so self-assured,

and he didn't know how to react. He settled for sneering "*Voodoo!*" and sauntered away.

By the time he returned, Jeb felt somewhat refreshed, and the pounding in his head had eased. He had stripped off his rags, since there was no one else around, and poured the dry sand from his brogans, then doused himself with bucket after bucket of water. The shirt and pants Cheney brought were not nearly big enough, but at least they were clean. Still wet, Jeb pulled them on. Then, ignoring Cheney, he started toward the big house.

"House nigger!"

He kept going without a backward glance.

"House nigger, I see you in the fields. You 'member." Cheney's laughter followed him.

Mr. Aaron and Mr. Joel were nowhere in sight when he passed the office. The wagon was gone, but a small road cart with a hood now stood in the courtyard near the big-house door. A young white man, about Jeb's age, was checking the harness. He glanced up and measured Jeb's size, as people did when Jeb passed by, but said nothing.

Jeb mounted the three steps that led up to the small porch outside the door. The doorway was open, and he could see through the wide central hall and the large open doors on the far side of the house, across the piazza and slopes of green parkland, to blue sky beyond. On the left side of the hall, a wide staircase led to the upper floors; on both sides, doors led to other rooms of the house. The ceiling of the hall was almost thirty feet high.

Not knowing what else to do, Jeb called out, "Miss Lucy . . . Miss Lucy?"

From somewhere in the house came the muffled sound of talk and laughter, but there was no answer.

"Miss Lucy?"

There was a brass eagle knocker on the open door, and Jeb reached in and flipped it a couple of times but without results. He was reluctant to enter the house without permission, particularly with the white man watching, but when a couple more calls went unanswered, it seemed he had no choice. He stepped in and advanced a few steps, appreciating the sudden coolness of the hall after the heat of the sun.

He called again. There was movement somewhere in the house and somewhere the slamming of a door, but still no answer.

"What are you doing here?"

The voice startled him, making him whirl about. He faced the hard blue-gray eyes of a young white woman. She was small and blond and, Jeb supposed, beautiful. She looked soft, aside from her eyes, but there was steel in her voice.

"I said, What are you doing here? Don't you know better than to come into this house without permission? You're no house servant here. You looking for a whipping?"

Jeb hated himself for appearing disconcerted. He forced himself to return the hard-eyed gaze.

"I'm looking for Miss Lucy."

"I don't care who you're looking for, boy. You don't just come wandering into this here house. Who are you? Did Lucy send for you?"

"No, ma'am. I was told to speak to her."

"Oh, you were told to speak to her. You got an insolent way about you, boy, you know that?"

Jeb didn't answer. He recognized the young woman as if he had known her all of his life. He had met her at a hundred houseparties, waited on her at tables, driven her to her appointments, suffered her every whim. She was an old and well-known enemy.

Her voice was milder when she spoke again, but her eyes remained hard.

"What's your name?"

"Jebediah Hayes, ma'am."

"Well, I'm Miss Amity. Think you can remember that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I think you better."

The hard gaze contained new interest now, and as it traveled lingeringly over his body, he hated the thin tight clothes that concealed virtually nothing. Miss Amity—any Miss Amity—had the ability to make him feel like an object, a piece of furniture, an animal. With a white man, at home, she might affect the utmost delicacy in word and action. But at a slave auction she would look at him

in this same way, emotionlessly, and ask questions which at any other time would make her blush.

Her eyes returned to his. "You're a good-looking boy, and you talk like a house servant. That why you're here? The houseboy job?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Papa musta paid a lot for you. . . . Don't talk much, do you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Good for you. I do hate a nigger all the time running off the mouth. Ain't that right, Leila?"

She spoke to a young black woman of about her own age who had entered the hall from a neighboring room. With his throbbing head and aching body, Jeb was in a poor state to appreciate beauty. But if there was any doubt in his mind about Miss Amity's beauty, there was none about Leila's. The full mouth, the delicate eyebrow, the full breasts above the narrow waist—to Jeb's eye she was as beautiful as any woman he had ever seen. She wore a dress that might have been Miss Amity's, he noted, and it didn't appear to be a cast-off. She looked at Jeb wonderingly, speculatively, a pink tongue-tip appearing at the corner of her mouth.

"This is Jebediah, Leila," Amity said. "Likely he's gonna be our new houseboy."

"He's pretty," Leila said.

Amity laughed. "If you're a good girl and behave yourself, maybe I'll give him to you." She crossed the hall and shouted up the staircase: "Lucy! Come down here and talk to this boy, you hear me?"

A muffled "Coming" floated down the stairs. Amity turned to Jeb again.

"We gonna be friends, Jeb?"

"I hope so, ma'am."

"We better be. 'Cause it's the only way for you to get along in this house, y'understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You just tell Miss Lucy—"

She broke off as someone appeared on the staircase, and Jeb looked up to see a girl descending. She was a complete contrast to Amity. Two or three years younger,

she was also taller, thinner, darker. Her hair was a thick cascade of black, and there was a touch of olive in her complexion. Yet, through some deep similarity, Jeb sensed that the two were sisters.

"I'm leaving now, Dulcy," Amity said. "Go tell Lucy I don't know just when I'll be back."

"Thought I'd just say good afternoon to Quentin."

Eyes and voice hardened. "I said I was leaving. Now, please do as I ask. You can pay your respects to Mr. Quentin some other time."

Eyes locked and Jeb witnessed a battle of wills. The younger woman, Dulcy, looked bewildered, as if she couldn't understand why there should be any such battle. She shrugged and looked away.

Amity appeared satisfied. She flashed Jeb a brief meaningless smile and went out the doorway into the courtyard. He heard her voice, all steel gone, suddenly fluting: "Why, Quentin, honey, you been waiting out here in this hot sunlight all this time? I do declare, honey child."

Jeb went to the door and watched as Amity climbed into the roadcart, assisted by the young man called Quentin. Quentin climbed in beside her and drove off, disappearing down a service lane to the east.

Miss Amity, Jeb thought, just might prove to be a problem.

He turned back into the hall and, averting his eyes from the two women, waited for Miss Lucy.

Two

They headed out the east service lane, past various out-buildings—storehouse, coach house, stable, barn—then drove south to the river. There they headed west, passing Sabre's Landing. A glossy ibis took to the air in a flash of red, and a marsh rabbit scurried out of their path. The brown river flowed slowly and lazily toward the sea, disturbed by hardly a sound. They saw no one—no field hands, no rambling lovers—which was as Amity wanted it.

"Where all'd you like to go now?"

"Oh, why don't we just stay on the river path, Quentin, honey? It's a lot cooler down here, the breeze off the river and all the shady trees. It was real nice of you to ask me out for a ride on a day like this."

"Should have asked Dulcy, too, maybe . . . and Lucy."

Amity gritted her teeth in irritation. Lucy had obviously been an afterthought; Dulcy had come to Quentin's mind first. But what in the world was so special

about Dulcy? Of course, she had just returned home after nearly three years up north, but even so . . .

"You couldn't hardly have got us all in this little cart, honey child."

"Could have used something bigger."

"Why, sure. Could have asked Papa and Uncle Joel to come along, too. Could have asked the whole family and my Leila and Mr. Turnage. Wouldn't that have been fun? Sometimes, Quentin Kimbrough, I get the distinct impression that you don't want to be alone with me."

"Why, Amity Sabre!" Quentin looked shocked. "How could any gentleman ever resist the opportunity to have your shining presence all to hisself?"

"Sweet talk, Quentin Kimbrough. Nothing but honey and sugar. You don't care a fiddle about poor little me."

"And yet here I am, driving out with you unchaperoned, heading along the river path, where there's many a secluded glen where the pipes of Pan may be heard and the spell of Aphrodite has brought about the consummation of love of many a passion-maddened youth and his swooning lady."

Amity giggled. "Now, Quentin Kimbrough, you just watch what you say!"

"Where the flesh grows strong and resistance weak, where the temptations of carnal joy and ecstasy are celebrated—"

"Now, you stop that! I'm not gonna put up with your talking naughty to me!"

"Naughty? Was I talking naughty? Why, Amity, honey, I wouldn't sully your pretty little ears with—"

"I know what you're trying to do, Quentin Kimbrough. You're just trying to get me all bo-o-oothered! You're just like all the other men, with just one thing on your mind."

"Well, if that's true, I reckon it's your fault, Amity. Us menfolk, we can't help it if you ladies get us all riled up."

"If you're all riled up, Quentin, maybe you better just turn around and take me back to the house. Go find yourself a wench and get yourself unriled."

"Now, why should I do that with you here?"

"You watch what you say, Mr. Kimbrough."

"I just mean that if you're all bo-o-oothered and I'm all riled up, why can't we do something about it together? Here in the sacred groves and glens of Pan and Aphrodite, it seems like the only neighborly thing—"

"Oh, *you!*"

Amity twisted in her seat and pounded with small fists on Quentin's shoulders. He laughed, dropped the reins, and threw his arms around her to stop the pummeling. The cart came to a halt, and they wrestled, Amity working her body over against Quentin's until he pinned her with a leg. She gave up the mock struggle and lay still. At that moment it was all right if he kissed her. She hoped he would put a hand on her breast, even slide it under her dress. The idea didn't thrill her—ordinarily she disliked physical sensations that challenged her self-control—but she would put up with it, even faking a response. She would have put up with a great deal more, in fact, to achieve her purposes. Men were such animals.

(Animals? For some reason, a vision of—what was his name?—of Jeb flashed through her mind: so tall, so darkly handsome, his shirt open over the deep chest, the pants hugging the thighs and revealing that he was so very much an animal.)

She waited, half-reclining on the seat of the cart. Quentin lay beside her, panting. And still she waited.

He laughed. Shaking his head as if to clear it, he sat up and took the reins again.

Damn!

"You win, honey," he said. "Your honor is safe with me."

Damn, damn, double-damn!

Well, it didn't really matter. Quentin was hers, everyone knew it, everyone assumed it (didn't they?), and sooner or later he would commit himself fully and finally. Sooner or later she would marry Quentin Kimbrough, and that meant that one day she would become the mistress of Kimbrough Hall and all its lands. Sabrehill would never be all hers. She would share it with her sisters, or rather their male heirs would share it, just as Papa and Uncle Joel did. But the Kimbrough plantation, its house fully as magnificent as Sabrehill, its lands as great, would be hers

alone. There she would reign, just as Quentin's mother reigned now. She would have a housekeeper who adored her—who else but Leila?—and the most impressive butler for miles around. Her staff would perform their duties with military precision and efficiency, anticipating her every whim and living only to please her. And since she wouldn't have to share with her sisters, she would be far richer than they. Nothing would be beyond her reach. She would have the Kimbrough house in Charleston, she would become powerful in the exclusive Saint Cecilia Society, she would travel to England and France and Italy. She would become *the* Mrs. Kimbrough.

Since she had conceived of the idea (When was that? She could not remember.) she had only once doubted that it would come true.

"Well, look where we are," Quentin said, interrupting her musings, and she instantly recognized the stretch of river bank with its patches of spiderwort and its configuration of tall palmettos.

So Quentin remembered too, another hot summer afternoon almost three years ago.

She had no idea when she had started disliking Dulcy. Her dislike was one of her earliest memories, something she had grown up with, lived with every day. Always, it seemed to her, Dulcy had been in the way. She vaguely remembered the woman who had been Dulcy's mother, the woman who had tried to be a mother to Lucy and Amity, too. But even if that had been possible, Dulcy had spoiled it; she was the one Papa's new wife preferred, the one Papa himself had seemed to love most.

It was always like that. She had secretly been glad when Dulcy's mother had died. The strange lady had only been in the way, taking up Papa's time, until Amity was almost as angry at Papa as she was at Dulcy and the strange lady. But after that, Dulcy had received even more attention, attention she didn't deserve. Everyone agreed that Amity was beautiful, lovely, charming, but sooner or later, so many of them—especially the men—turned their attention to Dulcy.

Yes, especially the men, young and old, and Amity

could not understand it. Why should a mere child draw such attention? How did she contrive it? By the time she was twelve or thirteen, the visiting beaux were asking, "Where's Dulcy today?", as if it were she they were calling on. Perhaps a dozen would gather on the piazza on certain Sunday afternoons, all their attention on Amity—until Dulcy appeared. She would prance across the piazza—skinny, big-eyed, dirty-faced as often as not—and there would be fresh laughter and new life in the party. More than once Amity sat, face burning, as she watched some beau giving Dulcy a very special wistful look, or heard him mutter, "Goddam, if only that little gal was three, four years older. . ." Only Uncle Joel, amiable bachelor, remained forever true to Amity.

On that summer afternoon three years ago, it all became too much for her. It was an oppressively hot day, and when Quentin asked her out for a walk, they wandered down to the river, where there was some illusion of coolness. As usual, Dulcy haunted them, tagging along, showing off, begging for attention—a gangly fourteen-year-old tomboy with a talent for getting in the way. The heat didn't seem to bother her in the slightest. She skylarked about, running and laughing, thrusting leaves down Quentin's collar, generally acting like a child and making it impossible for Amity and Quentin to become more intimate. Amity, increasingly hot and irritable, ceased to pay much attention to Quentin until suddenly she realized that Quentin was paying a great deal of attention to Dulcy. He was running about and wrestling with her as if he himself were a fourteen-year-old.

Amity realized in an instant what had happened. Dulcy, that thief of affections, had done it again.

Amity felt her self-control slip away, and she didn't try to stop her scream of anger. It was as if a demon had taken total possession of her. Her entire body shook. Her vision narrowed until she saw only the look of shock on Dulcy's hated face. She seized the younger girl by the shoulders and shook her, wild animal cries coming from her own throat.

Quentin must have tried to stop her. He shouted something but she never knew what. Dulcy looked too fright-

ened and bewildered to fight back as Amity thrust her toward the river's edge. She saw Dulcy falling into the water, found herself leaping in after her.

Dulcy gained her footing, stumbled away from Amity in the shallow water, and fell again. Amity brushed water from her eyes and went after her. They were out of the shade of the palmettos, and the sunlight was on them like fire. Amity lost a shoe in the muck of the riverbed. She found she had a large rock in her right hand, though she had no idea how it had got there. As she reached Dulcy, she raised it high over her head and brought it pounding down. Dulcy tried to dodge, but the rock connected, a glancing blow that brought a red flood through her dark hair. Amity raised the rock to strike again. Dulcy was strangling in the water and at the same time trying to scream. Amity brought the rock solidly down, and Dulcy's horrible sounds stopped. She held Dulcy under the water.

Then it was finished. She had been pushed aside, and Quentin, terror on his face, was dragging Dulcy up onto the bank.

Always afterwards Quentin laughed at her hot temper and pretended he didn't know why she had attacked Dulcy—as if he hadn't clearly revealed his susceptibility to her man-teasing younger sister. She hinted at an explanation to her Uncle Joel, who quite understood, but no one else even bothered to ask. Papa and Lucy merely looked at her, and at each other, as if she might be a touch mad or as if they had not previously understood the depths and dangers of her anger.

The incident had one good result: their father decided that the two younger sisters had best be separated until they grew up a bit. Dulcy would be sent to school in Boston. For the next few years she would live with their father's northern friends, and Amity could almost forget that she existed.

She might have consigned Quentin to oblivion forever after that—she was not a forgiving person—except that at some point she had conceived of becoming mistress

of Kimbrough Hall. And the dream persisted. Still, the sting of the river-path incident persisted, too, and it was over two years before she really forgave Quentin. It happened at a party given by Quentin's sister, Melanie. Amity found herself being led off, rather forcibly, toward a shadowed corner of the Kimbrough gardens. There was a strong scent of Madeira on Quentin's breath, and, Amity suspected, more than a little corn whiskey. She herself had sipped only a little wine, and that out of politeness. She disliked the warmth with which alcohol infused her body, the heady feelings it gave her, and the lack of control it might bring.

"Mr. Kimbrough," she said as they moved deeper into the shadows, circling around behind a holly tree, "you are being absolutely silly. After all, we practically been brought up together. Why, you are almost like a big brother to me."

"I sure don't feel like a brother to you."

Something sparked within Amity a sense of possibilities.

"Now, I'm mighty sorry to hear that."

"I wish you were glad."

"Aw, Quentin, honey, you mean you . . ."

She didn't resist as he gathered her into his arms. She let him raise her chin with his fingers.

"Like a brother, Quentin," she murmured as his lips moved closer to hers. "Like a brother . . ."

But it was not at all like a brother, and when she heard his sob and felt his sudden trembling, she was triumphant. After two years she would at last have a suitable revenge for those few minutes on the river path. All she had to do was protest even as she aroused him further—she knew the game well—then tear away from him, while chiding him for his animal-like behavior, and leave him in humiliated agony.

And lose everything that might be hers.

No, that was not the way. To have Quentin and Kimbrough Hall would be to best Dulcy and Lucy and every other female she knew. And the way to have Quentin was to give him neither humiliation nor victory. It was to

dangle before him like a golden bait the very special prize of herself. She and Kimbrough Hall—each would be a prize for the other.

After that, they saw each other with increasing frequency. They saw others as well, of course, and Quentin was irritatingly slow to make any final commitment, but there were further moments alone with him, moments that left him shaken, moments that teased him with the prize. Amity was certain that she was consolidating her position.

She would become mistress of Kimbrough Hall. The certainty grew, and so did the vision. She saw her days and nights, the shape of her life on the plantation. She saw the parties, the balls, the trips to her Charleston townhouse. She considered the staff that would be at her command—Leila and a fine cook and the maids and the houseboys and a butler like—

As the little cart jogged slowly along the shaded river path, Jeb came to her mind again. Jebediah Hayes, with his lean, hard-knit body, his head held high, his arrogant, sullen mouth.

Yes, someone like Jeb might do very well. He was young for the job, of course, but he looked impressive enough, and, in spite of his size and animal quality, he was much too fancy to be put into the fields. Yes, he might do very well indeed!

The idea amused and intrigued her, and she pondered it further. Leila her housekeeper, Jebediah her butler. She could see him in his dress suit, bowing low as she passed by, turning his head to smile fondly up at her—at the beautiful young mistress of Kimbrough Hall.

Looking at him curiously, the girl called Dulcy slowly came the rest of the way down the stairs. He didn't return her look. That was one of the things you had to learn if you were to survive—to keep your eyes off things that didn't concern you, or at least to seem to. Best to see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing. And never appear to stare at a white woman.

"Who's this?" the girl asked.

"This here's Jebediah," Leila said, smiling. "Ain't he something?"

"Jebediah . . ." Dulcy's voice had a northern ring. "He's the one who ran away, isn't he?"

"Reckon he is."

Dulcy moved closer, until it was difficult to avoid looking at her—she drew the eye. There was a dusky rose glow in her complexion, a richness of eye and lip, a grace of movement. Yes, white or not, she was beautiful.

Frowning slightly, as if honestly puzzled, she asked the inevitable question: "Why did you run away, Jebediah?"

"Reckon it was because of Mr. Turnage," Leila said. "Since he come here, we had more runaways every year. Can't stand that man."

"Leila, that's enough."

The voice belonged to a third white woman. She appeared on the stairs and, like Dulcy, paused when she saw him. Without taking her eyes from him, she said, "Leila, you just shoo now. Go about your business."

"Yes, Miss Lucy." Leila gave him a last lingering look and an inviting smile and left the hall—probably, Jeb knew, to listen from behind a door.

So this was Miss Lucy, descending the rest of the stairs. Jeb had assumed he was to see a colored housekeeper. Instead he was confronted with a white woman in her late twenties, taller than Miss Dulcy and almost as fair as Miss Amity. Her eyes were large, very blue, and searching. The cheekbones were high, the cheeks themselves thin, the jaw firm. It was a face that succeeded in being both strong and delicate at the same time. It was also an intelligent face, and one that had known pain.

"You said this is the runaway?" she asked. Her voice was low and slightly husky, with more strength than music.

"I guess so," Dulcy said. "They must have just brought him back. His name's Jebediah."

"Oh, indeed. And what are you doing here in the house, Jebediah?"

"Mr. Aaron sent me. He said to find out if you wanted me for a houseboy."

"A runaway field hand?" Lucy said incredulously. She smiled and shook her head. "Well, that's Papa. You're fortunate. If it was up to Mr. Joel or Mr. Turnage, you'd be at the whipping post."

"That comes next. Ma'am."

Lucy raised an eyebrow as if suspicious that he might be mocking her, and perhaps he was. He was too weary, too sick, to know. But he did know he should act humble and contrite for the sake of getting the job in the big house. The job might very well offer him his one chance of survival.

"Do you know anything at all about house chores, Jebediah?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Where did you learn?"

He explained that he had been brought up in a plantation big house. "My father was the butler, my mother the housekeeper. I became a houseboy."

"You speak quite well. Did you go to a plantation school?"

Jeb hesitated to answer. Most slave-owners strongly disapproved of education for blacks, but others allowed slave children to attend classes with the whites if they were so inclined. As far as he knew, there were no white children at Sabrehill, and he had no idea of what the attitude might be.

As if sensing his worry, Lucy said, "I don't disapprove of education for colored people, Jebediah. I think laws against education are wrong."

Jeb decided it would be stupid to lie and be caught out. The best thing he could do was to trim the truth a little.

"I was raised as a companion to little Willy Pinkham, ma'am," he said. "Willy had tutors. I was allowed to sit and listen and do the exercises if I wished, and to learn whatever I could."

"And did you learn very much?"

The tone was patronizing, however faintly, and Jeb remembered the long hours of practicing letters and numbers while Willy played, the hours hidden behind a chair in the Pinkham library, curled up with a book, and he

wanted to answer, *Madam, I learned a hell of a lot more than little Willy did.* But he didn't dare.

He said, "Some, ma'am."

"Numbers?" Dulcy asked quickly. "Can you calculate?"

"Some," he said.

"Just simple figures," Lucy said, "to help me with the household accounts. But it's not really necessary—"

"I can do that, ma'am."

"That's very good. Now I'd like to show you the pantry."

Lucy took him into the pantry, where she asked him a few questions about the use of china and the care of silver. She asked him if he knew how to announce guests, supervise a formal dinner, serve coffee, brandy, wine. As far as he could tell, she was satisfied with his answers, and hope began to grow. He might actually be given the job.

"You'll find that customs differ from one house to another," Lucy said as she led the way back to the hall, "but I don't think you'll find our ways too difficult." She stopped and looked him squarely in the eyes, questioningly. "You do want the job, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Will we one day find that you've run away from us again?"

"I never ran away while I was working in the Pinkham house, ma'am."

The answer was indirect and therefore evasive—a mistake. Lucy's eyes widened, and Jeb felt he had lost ground.

"How long were you in the fields?"

"Four years. Not at Pinkham—I was sold for debts."

"Have you run away before?"

"Yes, ma'am." Aaron and Joel Sabre already knew that, so he dared not lie. But it wasn't the answer Lucy wanted to hear.

"I dare say you've had a difficult time," she said slowly. "Perhaps some day you'll tell me about it."

"There are some things a nice white lady shouldn't have to concern herself with, ma'am."

The words came out all wrong. He had hoped to give the lady exactly what she wanted to hear, making up for his poor answers. But somehow, in his fatigue, it came out a snotty nigger's answer, its subservience and concern obviously false. Well, that's what he was, wasn't he?—a snotty nigger. He saw Lucy's eyes harden, thought of the whipping still ahead of him, and bade the job goodbye.

"Are we going to get along together, Jebediah?"

Once again Dulcy quickly stepped in to help him. "Of course we are, all of us. Aren't we, Jebediah?"

Jeb nodded, as he was supposed to do. "Yes, ma'am. I'll do my very best for you all."

Lucy softened. "Then we'll try you out. Go tell Mr. Aaron that. Tell him I want you to live in the butler's cottage. It's close by, and there's a bell there, with a line to the house. When you hear it ring, night or day, you're to come as quickly as you can."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You'll have a day or two off to regain your strength, and I'll tell you more about your duties another time. You may go now."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you, ma'am."

He turned his back on the searching blue eyes and went out into the courtyard. He felt shaken and confused; he couldn't quite believe his luck in getting the job, even provisionally. Turnage had been right: you simply didn't reward a runaway field hand by giving him a job in the big house.

"Jebediah."

He turned back. Dulcy had followed him. Her dark eyes were concerned. "Jeb, I . . ." She glanced toward the office, and he knew she was thinking of the whipping which was still to come. "I hope it won't be too bad," she said, "and I do hope you like working in the house."

For some reason, perhaps only because he was physically weak and therefore emotionally vulnerable, he found himself touched. And he did not wish to be touched, not by anyone, black or white, ever again. He muttered, "Yes, ma'am," and continued on toward the office.

The whipping was hardly the worst he had ever suffered, and far less than what he had expected, but still it was bad enough.

"All right, take him to the post."

"But Mr. Aaron, sir, don't you want to wait until all the hands are out of the fields and make 'em watch?"

"No, Mr. Turnage, I do not want—"

"Mr. Turnage is right, Aaron."

"Dammit, I want to get this over as fast as possible. Let's get him to the post, I said! The hands will hear all they need to know."

At the post, Jeb took off his scanty shirt. Cheney had reappeared, and he tied Jeb's wrists to the rings. Jeb knew better than to fight what was happening. When Turnage started to unfasten Jeb's pants and pull them down, Aaron said, "That won't be necessary."

"He'll just dirty up a good pair of pants."

"I said, let it be, Mr. Turnage."

There was a delay while Aaron Sabre made Cheney fetch a different whip. "Not the rawhide, goddam it, Cheney. I don't want him cut all to hell. Go get that four-foot snake off the office wall."

The whip was duly delivered.

"How many lashes, sir?" Cheney sounded enthusiastic.

"Until I say to stop."

Jeb had no real idea of how many lashes he got; he lost count in the first dozen. By then his breath was harsh in his throat as he tried to hold back his cries, and he was throwing himself against the post. By perhaps fifteen lashes he was lifting himself bodily by his thonged wrists. Cheney knew how to use a whip, though that was hardly news to Jeb. He struggled to hold back his screams, though he knew it was best to cry out. Let the bastards know it hurt, let them know they were whipping away his pride, and have it over with. Finally, after thirty lashes? thirty-five? forty? it was all over. His tongue was raw from chewing on it, and wounded-animal groans came from his throat, but he hadn't screamed, and his pants were unsoiled.

He felt himself being cut down. Half-conscious, he fell to his hands and knees and refused to let himself go down farther. Cold water splashed over his back, and Cheney helped him to his feet. "Now, what you say you gon' do about my whip, nigger boy?" he whispered into Jeb's ear.

His shirt was thrown over his shoulder, and Aaron Sabre said, "All right, take him to the butler's cottage." Aaron was only a voice, and the world was a haze, a blur of white buildings, a brick mansion, gravel, sheep on green grass, a haze through which he was guided, staggering. All of the pounding in his head and the sickness in his belly had returned, worse than ever.

The haze cleared abruptly. He found himself in front of a small white building, a cottage on the far west side of the courtyard. Turnage was prodding him in the belly with the butt of a whip, and Cheney stood a few yards off, grinning.

"Now, you listen to me, nigger boy," Turnage said, 'and you hear me good. This time you got off easy. Ran yourself right into the big house, you did. But I hope you learned your lesson. You lower that goddam head of yours, and when a white man passes by, boy, you either be on your feet or on your knees. Because if you don't, you ain't gonna stay in the big house for long. And when you come out its door for the last time, you come back to *my* country. And for you, nigger, that's gonna be pure hell."

Jeb hardly heard him. As soon as the overseer had turned his back, he opened the cottage door, went up the two steps, and stumbled in. He shoved the door closed behind him and looked around without really seeing. In a small back room he found a bed with a bare shuck-filled mattress, and he let himself fall forward, face down on it.

The impossible had happened. Four years of hell had come to an end, terminated by one last whipping. After four years of death and agony and maddened running, he was at last out of the fields, at last back at the life he had been trained for. He had survived, through some

miracle, and with a little luck he might never have to taste the lash again.

He sank gratefully into sleep.

He'd caught a runaway slave, brought him home, and had him whipped: Turnage felt that he'd done a good day's work. Nevertheless, he had a horse saddled and took a leisurely ride through the fields to let it be known that he was back. He then visited the slave quarters, the carpenter shop, the brick factory, the coach house and stable—all the areas that were his responsibility. If there had been any slacking off in his absence, the slaves now knew he was back.

By the time he was finished, dusk was falling and the slaves were coming out of the fields. Turnage washed up and went to the big-house kitchen to get his supper. He brought it back to his small three-room house and ate it while sitting on his porch. The house was situated on the east side of the circular courtyard, and from the porch he saw lights going off in the office to his left around the circle, coming on in the big house, and growing brighter in the kitchen. The butler's cottage, directly across from him on the courtyard, remained dark.

He carefully watched the courtyard, in hope of seeing Leila.

His supper finished, he put his plate on a corner of the porch to be collected by a kitchen wench. He went into his house and, in the dark, poured himself a cup of whiskey and lit his pipe. All he needed now for complete satisfaction, he thought, was a woman, and in the next hour or two he would almost surely have one. His pick, more or less, since they wouldn't resist if they knew what was good for them. The Sabres wouldn't like it much if they knew about the black women he had forced, but to hell with that. A man had to have it from time to time if he was to stay healthy, and what were slave wenches for if you couldn't take your pick?

Which one would he have tonight?

Leila.

His tongue thickened and his throat went dry as he

thought of her. She was the one who always came to mind first—Leila, the not-yet-obtainable. All the others were mere substitutes and, once had, they invariably disappointed. None of them, not even the best, approached the ideal of perfection he dreamed of. But *Leila* . . .

She was a saucy little bitch, he thought, smiling tightly in the dark. The way she turned up her nose at a white man and flagged her insolent tail, she seemed to think she was as good as any of the Sabre sisters. But that only increased her promise. He had watched her ripen for almost four years, four years in which his desire for her had been whetted daily, and soon he would have her. He *had* to have her. In a way, he regarded her as his right—as something he had been earning by his patience, waiting for, saving for the right time. He liked to think, whether or not it was true, that no other man had had her yet. She was his. He had marked her down as his and his alone, and he would be the first to have her.

Perhaps tonight.

He returned to his little porch and sat down, his chair propped back against the wall. He puffed his pipe and sipped his whiskey. There was still no light, no sign of life, from the butler's cottage.

Turnage had a nagging sense of dissatisfaction: the nigger shouldn't have got off so easily. He had known the boy meant trouble from the moment he had heard the highfalutin house-servant accent, and that had been confirmed in the worst way when Jeb had nearly spat in Turnage's face—and taken a chance on being killed. But Turnage hadn't minded. He knew how to deal with that kind of nigger, and he enjoyed doing it. Now he would have no further chance, and that rankled. It rankled badly.

The evening deepened, and the house lights seemed brighter. Thunder, Aaron Sabre's favorite stallion, whinnied in the stables and kicked his stall. Children shouted back in the quarters, and somewhere in the shadows a man and a woman laughed together. Women moved back and forth, dimly seen, along the portico between the kitchen and the big house. Turnage thought about women.

Leila . . .

He couldn't force her, of course, and he didn't really want to. She was no common field hand, and she was much too close to Miss Amity for anyone to trifle with her. But she was grown up now, and it was time she realized his importance on the plantation, his worth.

He rocked forward hard in his chair as he saw her emerge from the kitchen. She had something in her hands, perhaps a bowl, and she was walking toward the butler's cottage. Dim as the light was, he recognized her carriage and gait. He was absolutely certain it was she.

She knocked at the door and waited. Evidently there was no answer, for she knocked again. After a moment, she opened the door and disappeared into the dark interior of the cottage. A light flickered within, and the cottage door closed.

Turnage's heart thudded sickeningly. It had been like this from Jeb's first day at Sabrehill: he had turned the eye of every female who got close to him, and his apparent indifference only increased their interest. That was one reason Turnage had decided to cut him down to size. And now Leila was with Jeb.

His Leila.

He waited for her to reemerge from the cottage, but the door didn't open. She must have brought food to Jeb, and there was no reason for her to remain in the cottage, no reason at all . . . except one.

He stood it as long as he could. Then, putting down his cup and pipe, he left his porch and walked purposefully across the courtyard to the butler's cottage. He took great pleasure in throwing the door open, wide and hard, with a shattering crash.

The only light within came from a candle in the back room, and he strode toward it, boots banging on the wooden floor. Anger was building, and he wanted to cause fear. He was ready to seize Leila and throw her bodily out of the cottage.

She looked up startled as he entered the room. She was seated on a stool at the side of the bed a nearly empty bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other. Jeb,

though half-naked, appeared to be asleep. His shirt and boots missing, he lay on his side, propped up on pillows. Turnage almost felt disappointed.

"Who told you to do that?" he asked weakly.

"Miss Lucy." Leila's eyes and voice were as sullen as she dared make them with the overseer. "Said to give him some broth."

She turned back to Jeb and slipped the spoon between his teeth. He winced but swallowed.

"He feigning sleep?"

"He ain't feigning. He hardly roused up all the time I been feeding him." Leila slipped the spoon into Jeb's mouth again.

Turnage forced a laugh. "Some way to treat a runaway nigger, huh? He sure don't look like much now, do he?"

Leila paused in the feeding to look at Jeb. Her gaze traveled slowly down over his bare chest, his loosened pants, his long thighs. The quick, questioning glance she then threw at Turnage was nothing more than a disguised sneer, and he felt himself flush. There had to be a way he could teach this little bitch her place.

Hungering for her, he watched while she fed Jeb the last few spoonfuls of broth and wiped his mouth. Then, as she left the bed and went to blow out the candle, he stepped into the doorway blocking it. In the darkness, he could just make out the shine of her eyes as she approached him. He didn't move.

She came to a halt before him. "I got to go now, Mr. Turnage," she said.

He didn't answer. He reached for her. She didn't resist as he took her arms and drew her body against his. He moved against her, letting her know the quickening of his desire. Never before had he touched her like this, never had he dared. But she had to be taught.

"I got to go," she repeated, her voice lifeless. "Miss Amity waiting for me."

"You go when I tell you to go."

"Miss Amity—"

"Miss Amity ain't the overseer of Sabrehill. I am. So don't look at me like I'm a common field nigger, 'cause that's the mistake your friend laying there on the bed

made. Don't think what happened to him can't happen to you." He paused, letting the threat sink in; a house servant was apt to forget the power he had. "On the other hand, if you was to be nice to me—"

"Please. I got to go to Miss Amity."

"Please. That's better." The girl's body was dead against his, and he took what bleak satisfaction he could from the one word. He said, "We gonna be friends, Leila, good friends," then released her, forcing her to brush against him as she went by. He followed her out of the cottage and watched her hurrying toward the kitchen.

It wasn't much of a victory, not really a victory at all, and it left him feeling cheated. After catching a runaway, bringing him back to Sabrehill, and putting him to the post, there had to be a better way to end the day. He deserved a reward. And if he couldn't get the one he wanted from Leila, he'd get another elsewhere.

He crossed back over the courtyard, followed a service lane past the east outbuildings, and headed some twelve hundred feet through the darkness toward the lights of the slave quarters. The quarters were made up of a variety of cabins—log, clapboard, brick—standing in irregular ranks around a communal square. To the south was a barrack for single men too old, or unwilling, to live in their parental cabins. To the north was the single women's barrack. Turnage went to the square and headed north, taking his time, keeping his eyes open for anything promising.

The dinner hour was just ending, and the slaves sat on their doorsteps and stood about the square in small groups. They fell silent as he went by, many of them turning their eyes away, as if they wanted to avoid his attention. If he'd had his way, they would all have been locked into their cabins immediately after supper, but Aaron Sabre would not allow that. It only made them resentful, he said, and never stopped a runaway who really wanted to run. It was sometimes pointed out to Turnage that there had been a rise in the frequency of runaways since he had come to Sabrehill. His reply was that he had also raised the profits.

He felt the hatred and the resentment as he walked

slowly along the row of cabins. He did not mind it to-night; it made him feel powerful and dangerous. There were other times when his palms sweated and his back crawled as he went among the field hands, and he had to keep telling himself that he was not afraid—that the only slave he feared was the slave who did not fear him. Fear, when you got right down to it, was the only way to rule slaves, and the Sabres be damned.

“Evening, Mr. Turnage, sir.”

It was Cheney, standing in the shadow of a cabin, smoking his pipe. If Cheney feared Turnage, he never showed it. Physically, he was perhaps the most dangerous black in the county, an old fighter who seldom lost. But he was a foreman, a driver, a trusted lieutenant who had proven his loyalty to his captain with a ready willingness to use his whip.

“Evening, Cheney.”

Cheney emerged from the shadows, his pipe glowing as he puffed it.

“Everything peaceful around here, sir.”

“That’s good, Cheney. That’s good.”

“Guess they really gon’ put our Jeb in the big house, ain’t they?”

Turnage was silent. Sometimes Cheney went a little too far with his familiarity, but silence was enough to warn him.

“Way I look at it, Mr. Turnage, sir, we best off rid of him.”

“You think so, Cheney?”

“Oh, sure. House nigger, he too soft for the fields. Big boy, but never do a big man’s work. Just make trouble. Soft.”

“He ran mighty hard for four days.”

“Back and forth, roundabout, four days,” Cheney said contemptuously, “and he only got a day’s ride away.”

An idea was beginning to develop in Turnage’s mind. Maybe Jeb was not beyond his reach after all. Maybe Leila would think less of Jeb when Turnage was done with him.

“You really think he’s soft, Cheney? Softer, say, than any of the drivers?”

"He fancy, ain't he, Mr. Turnage, sir? Fancy is soft."

"But he ain't always worked in a house. He worked in the fields quite a while before he came here. That could have toughened him up."

"House nigger," Cheney insisted. "Mouth work good, all them big white words, but make him work like a man, he don't last. Give him some whip, he run every time."

"Yeah, I guess a nigger like you, you could outlast him."

Cheney grinned and thumped his chest. "This boy an old Gullah 'gator. He outfight, outwork, outlast any house nigger any time."

"Reckon you're right about that, Cheney. Reckon you're right." Turnage grinned. "You know something, all of a sudden I got this feeling we ain't seen the last of Mr. Jebediah Hayes."

Cheney's eyes caught on Turnage's and held, as if reading what was behind them. He returned the grin.

"Reckon that could be so, Mr. Turnage, sir."

"We'll just bide our time."

"We'll do that, sir."

"Wouldn't want our old friend to forget us."

"Surely wouldn't, sir."

"Good night, Cheney."

"Good night, Mr. Turnage, sir."

Turnage continued on his way toward the women's barrack, feeling much better. Much, much better.

Three

Leila hurried back through the darkness toward the bright lights of the kitchen. She felt Turnage's gaze on her back, and her body still registered the pressure of his, making her feel dirty. *He ain't gonna get me*, she thought fiercely. *He ain't gonna get me, don't give a damn if he is the overseer, he ain't!* Her knees shook, and she had to resist the urge to break into a run.

She had seen this coming for a long time, almost from the day of Turnage's arrival at Sabrehill. But she had had protection. She herself had seen to that, long before she had laid eyes on Mr. Turnage. At the age of ten, her mother dead and her father unknown, some instinct had told her to find a white person, a guardian, and she had settled on Amity. Miss Lucy had been too much older and too involved in her own affairs. Dulcy, a year younger than Leila, had obviously been too young. But Amity had been strong-willed, possessive of all that she considered hers, and susceptible to flattery: in some ways, the perfect protector. Leila had had no trouble ingratiating her-

self with the white girl, and thereafter she had been safe. Until now.

Mr. Turnage was getting out of hand.

Fear and hatred boiled up in Leila. At the doorway of the kitchen, she threw a quick look back toward Turnage and saw that he was still staring after her. She said something obscene that made Momma Lucinda turn away from the oven and look at her, and she stomped into the scullery and banged the bowl and spoon down on a table. Momma Lucinda told her to watch her tongue, missy, and Leila's reply made young Irish, down in the larder, burst out laughing.

Leila looked out a window. The overseer was crossing the courtyard. He didn't stop at his house, but continued out of sight along a lane, which meant he was headed for the quarters. And Leila knew what that meant. It meant that, having failed with her, Mr. Turnage was looking for another woman. He might find a wench who was perfectly willing to bed him in hope of favors in return. Or he might fancy some wife who would have to submit so that her husband wouldn't be beaten in the fields for the next week. Hatred boiled in Leila like hot acid.

"God damn him to hell," she said slowly and passionately. "God damn him to everlasting hell and perdition, and I shall make a joyful noise. I shall praise the Lord for burning his ugly ass, I shall give thanks unto the Lord—"

"Now, you stop that!" Momma Lucinda said, overriding her. Lucinda was a handsome, heavy-boned woman of about forty, who had earned her title by being "black momma" to Amity and Dulcy. She shook a finger at Leila. "Somebody hear you talking like that, you get whipped within a inch of your life. And deserve it, too!"

Leila ignored the warning. "There he goes. Gonna force hisself on some nigger girl. Gonna hop in bed with a nigger man's woman. And you think Mr. Aaron don't know? You think Mr. Joel don't know?" She was being indiscreet, talking too much, but she could not help herself.

"You just don't say nothing against Mr. Aaron and Mr. Joel. You won't find no kinder masters—"

"But you think they don't know?"

"I mind my own business."

"Course they know. Ain't no way they can't know. But they don't do nothing, they just let Mr. Turnage have his way, so don't tell me I won't find no kinder masters."

Irish came up the steps out of the larder. He was a skinny, handsome boy, Momma Lucinda's seventeen-year-old son, and it occurred to Leila that she wouldn't mind bedding down with him—if only to spite the overseer.

"Wha'd old Turnage ever do to you?" he asked, grinning.

"He touched me, is what. Been sniffing around me ever since he come here."

"He *touched* you!" Irish pretended amazement. "Him, sniffing around the likes of *you*? Whatever give you the idea a growed-up man give a second look to a scrawny little darky girl like you? Whatever make you think—"

At another time Leila might have shrugged off the words or even returned the teasing. Now she turned with a squeal of pain and lashed out; her open hand caught Irish squarely across the face. He roared, grabbed at her, tried to return the blow. They grappled.

"You don't fight in my kitchen!"

"I get you, boy!" Leila kicked and clawed.

"I get you, cater-mount!"

"I cater-mount you!"

"Out! Out of my kitchen!"

"Oh, boy, you don't know what you missing! You don't know what you ain't gonna get from me now!"

"Don't want nothing from you, scrawny."

"Then you ain't much of a man, pigeon pizzle!"

"Out! Get out!"

Irish howled with laughter as they fell to the floor, and tears of frustration flooded Leila's eyes. Through the watery tide she saw his broad grin and tried to rip it away, but he easily held her off, and when she tried to knee his balls, he checked the blow with a leg and flipped her away from him onto her back.

"Bastard, bastard, bastard—"

"What in the world is going on here?"

"They are impossible, Miss Lucy, just impossible. Don't know what I'm going to do with that boy."

"Well, she hit me first!"

Irish scrambled to his feet. Leila, blubbering (pathetically, she hoped), rose to her feet more slowly. Miss Lucy came into focus before her blurred eyes.

"Will someone please tell me what this is all about?"

"Just teasing, Miss Lucy," Momma Lucinda said quickly, "and they let it get out of hand. Both of them old enough to know better."

"Teasing about what? Leila, stop crying."

The kitchen was silent.

"Well, Leila," Momma Lucinda said, the faintest note of challenge in her voice, "do you want to tell?"

Did she want to tell?

She herself had just said that there was no way that the Sabres could not know of their overseer's activities among the slave women. But, aside from catching him themselves, the only way they could possibly know was by being informed. And to inform was a dangerous business. Until there was a great weight of evidence against an overseer, his word was invariably taken against a mere slave's. And his retaliation, sooner or later, was inevitable.

But Leila had the protection of the mansion and of Amity Sabre—and she was angry.

"You won't be mad at me, Miss Lucy?"

"I may be, if you don't tell me straight out."

"It's that goddam Mr. Turnage—"

"Watch your tongue!" Momma Lucinda snapped, and Miss Lucy gave her a quick silencing look.

"What about Mr. Turnage?"

"He been laying eyes on me ever since he come here. And tonight, when I took broth to the new houseboy like you said, he followed me. Grabbed me and started rubbing up against me with his . . . Well, you *said* to tell you straight out!"

Miss Lucy was pale, her eyes wide. "Leila," she said

softly, "are you sure you're telling me the exact truth?"

"It's the truth, Miss Lucy. And when I told Irish, he teased me, so I slapped him."

"I don't blame you. What else happened?"

"That's all. Except he talked like I'd get a bad whipping if I wasn't . . . wasn't nice to him. Miss Lucy, I don't have to be nice to him, do I?"

"Not that way, no."

"I don't want to get in no trouble, Miss Lucy. If Mr. Turnage find out I told you—"

"If you've told me the truth, you'll be in no trouble. I promise you that. But you've got to promise me to stay as far as possible from Mr. Turnage. Don't look at him, don't talk to him, just stay away from him. Do you understand?"

"I do, and I promise."

"Very well. We're not even going to talk about it anymore. Now, go on to the house. I think Miss Amity is looking for you."

"Yes, ma'am."

He ain't gonna get me! she swore again, as she hurried along the portico. *He ain't!*

The lights came back on in the office as Lucy left the kitchen, and she hurried across the courtyard toward them. *They have got to do something about Mr. Turnage*, she thought angrily. *They simply must!*

The office consisted of a single large room, filled with cabinets, two desks, a table, a large comfortable couch, a few prints, an ancient unworkable musket, and a whip hung on the wall. A door opened onto the courtyard, another onto the portico. Desk tops were cluttered with papers, journals, and lock boxes.

"Papa, Uncle Joel . . ." The office was private—man's country. Even she had to wait for her father's smile and nod before stepping through the open door. "It's Mr. Turnage, Papa. He's been at it again."

Joel glanced up from his desk but shook his head and looked away, ready to disbelieve. Aaron, at his desk, said, "Oh? And who told the tale this time?"

"Leila. She was feeding the new boy broth just a little

while ago, when Mr. Turnage came in and made advances."

Joel thumped a heavy hand down on his desk. "It beats me how you're so quick to take a slave's word when she speaks against a white man!"

Lucy felt a small quiver of shock at her uncle's use of the word *slave*. Like many another sensitive young Southern lady, she exercised a gentle hypocrisy: the "coloreds" were not slaves; they were "our hands," "our servants," "our people."

"Now, Uncle Joel, that's not fair," she said. "Leila is not a troublemaker, any more than Maybelle or Olympia. I don't know about Leila, but Maybelle and Olympia are not promiscuous, and none of them have the slightest reason to lie."

"But they're all house servants, not one of them outa the fields. Now, don't that signify something?"

"What, Joel?" Aaron asked gently, smiling. "What does it signify?"

Joel's beefy face reddened slightly. "Well, I don't know, but it must signify *something*."

"It signifies that the field hands are much more frightened of Mr. Turnage than the house servants are," Lucy said. "That's what it signifies."

"Aw, come on, now—"

"That's true," Aaron agreed. "And it didn't escape me that a week after the Maybelle incident, her husband, out in the fields, received the worst whipping of his life."

"If that's all you've got to go on—"

"There's a great deal more than that, Uncle Joel. For one thing, there are far too many light-skinned pickaninies around here."

Joel burst out laughing. "Lucy, honey, I don't want to offend you, but if a little colored gal wants to have some pleasure, that's strictly her business. And who she has it with, that's strictly his business, too. You can't go around legislating nigger morals. Morals is something they just don't understand. Ain't their fault. It's just that way with primitive people."

Lucy felt her face warming. "I'm sorry, but I don't agree. And furthermore, Uncle Joel, some of those light-

skinned babies were born into families—*dark*-skinned families. Which means that the parents must have suffered a great deal, thanks to Mr. Turnage. You see, I am not entirely ignorant of what goes on in the quarters.”

“Aaron, you should never have sent her up north to school. Ruined her for good. Her and Dulcy both.”

Aaron shook his head. “Joel, I know how highly you regard Mr. Turnage. He’s your hunting partner, your boon companion. But we do have a serious situation here. And when you consider that the rate of runaways is up—”

“So are profits!”

“We won’t miss any meals by giving up a few dollars and a lot of aggravation. Now, I’m going to speak rather strongly to Mr. Turnage. And when his contract comes up again, I think we’re going to have to reconsider it.”

With a gesture of disgust, Joel thumped his boots on the floor, stood up from his desk, and walked to the door.

“Joel, please don’t say anything to Mr. Turnage. I’ll handle it.”

“All right, you handle it!” Joel walked out into the darkness without looking back.

Aaron slumped in his chair and sighed. He smiled at Lucy. “At heart, your uncle is probably as kindly a man as you’ll ever meet. But there are some things he refuses to understand.”

“I know.”

“He blinds himself. Clings to the nonsense that the Negro is a natural slave. As if the belief made it possible for him to live as an honorable man.” Aaron Sabre shook his head. “He doesn’t understand that to live honorably in this world is quite impossible.”

“Impossible, Papa?”

“Lucy, I have never met a truly intelligent man, north or south, slave-owner or abolitionist, who believed the Negro to be a natural slave. He conspires to kill us, burns Charleston nightly, and runs off to join the maroons or the Seminoles. Is this the way of a natural slave? At Sabrehill we get along all right—or have so far. But on most plantations life is a constant battle between the blacks and the whites.”

“Then why not let the—the slaves go?”

"Go where? Free, to be sold into slavery again? Free, starve? Free, to be as bad off as poor whites? At least our people are better off than that. It seems to me that the best thing I can do is try to take care of them. If they'll believe I'm trying to do that—in spite of Mr. Turnage—then maybe somehow we'll all survive and live a few good hours."

Aaron Sabre paused and rubbed tired eyes. "Or maybe I'm rationalizing. Yes, I think I am. The truth is that to change the world even a little I'd have to give up my comforts. And I don't want to do that. Which demonstrates again the difficulty of honor."

Lucy moved to her father's side and pulled his head over against her. "Poor Papa."

Aaron looked at her. "Lucy, why the hell don't you get married? Paul Devereau's not such a bad fellow."

"Now, Papa!"

"No, I mean it. I never tried to make ladies out of you girls. I raised you like frontier farm girls and let you run wild and unchaperoned in a way that was disgraceful, and figured you'd grow up to be real women and wives, God damn it. Now, why don't you get married?"

"Oh, who would I marry, Papa! I don't know a single man I like that I can talk to. Not even Paul, not really."

"Why do you have to talk to the son-of-a-bitch? As long as he's reasonably honest and can do stud service—"

Lucy burst out laughing. "There it is! Now it all comes out! All you care about is having grandchildren!"

"Well, it's not a bad thought, is it? It doesn't look like Joel or I will ever beget any male heirs, and you won't find many people who'll agree that a woman can run a plantation. But if you could get a man onto the place to back up your judgment, then when you whelp a boy or two, he could eventually take over."

"Oh, Papa, I love you," Lucy said, hugging her father. "But if you don't mind, I'll let Dulcy or Amity do that little favor for you."

Aaron Sabre shook his white mane, and the weariness in his eyes deepened. "There are problems there, too. For both girls."

"It'll all work out."

Aaron looked up again. "Do you really think Amity's going to marry the Kimbrough boy?"

Lucy shrugged. "She certainly acts as if she had her heart set on him."

"Mm. Well, she could do worse, I suppose."

"Of course, he's not too bright, but he's reasonably honest and can do stud service, and she doesn't have to talk to the son-of-a-bitch—"

"Lucy!"

Father and daughter laughed together.

"Oh, forget about Mr. Turnage," Amity said irritably. "I'll have Uncle Joel speak to him, and that'll be the end of it." She couldn't understand why Leila was making such a fuss over the incident. She herself could not stand the man, but what could it matter to Leila?

"Still wish we was going to Charleston for the hot season. Want to stay as far from that man as I can get."

"Well, we ain't going, Leila, so forget it. Mr. Quentin ain't going this year, 'cause he's learning to run his daddy's plantation, and I promised to stay here and keep him company. We'll go to Charleston next year."

To the Kimbrough House. When I'm Mrs. Kimbrough.

Amity lay face down on her bed with Leila straddling her. Leila's fingers sank slowly, gently, into the base of her neck, kneading and massaging. They worked slowly out onto the shoulders, then moved over the thin cotton nightgown to the shoulder blades, deftly manipulating the muscles.

"Harder," Amity said. "I'm a little stiff from that ride with Mr. Quentin this afternoon. Be real nice to me tonight, Leila, honey."

There was a pause, and the bed shook as Leila threw off her own nightgown. She then attacked Amity's back again, working her way slowly down to buttocks, thighs, calves. When she reached the ankles, she started back up again, working so hard that Amity could hear her panting.

A flood of luxurious feeling swept through Amity's body and began to build. It was a familiar feeling, but one which she never allowed herself to have at any time

other than these late hours alone with Leila. Like the headiness brought on by wine or whiskey, it was too threatening to her self-control, too dangerous to be indulged in at any other time. Even now, she could give herself up to it only by lying perfectly still, moved only by Leila's touch, as if her body and her sensations belonged to someone else. As long as Leila alone was causing the sensations, and Amity remained passive, she was not responsible. And she was safe.

She thought of Jebediah.

She had seen him only once, of course, and then only briefly. But he had returned to her mind repeatedly, each time stronger, better looking, more impressive, and she was increasingly intrigued by the idea of making him her personal servant. Lucy would no doubt object to losing her new houseboy, but that was a minor obstacle. Since her father refused to separate a husband and a wife, even if they were only slaves, all she had to do was marry Leila off to Jebediah. Then when Amity married Quentin and moved to Kimbrough Hall, she would take both slaves with her. Papa and Uncle Joel would insist.

Simple.

As Amity rolled over, Leila moved off of her back. Dark skinned, she knelt by her blond mistress like a beautiful black cat, sleek and rounded, sculpted in shadows by the lamplight. Amity smiled and slid a hand over Leila's smooth dark thigh.

"You like our new houseboy, don't you?" she asked, confident of the answer.

Leila grinned back and with a fingertip traced a design on Amity's cotton-covered belly as if writing a word. "Je-be-di-ah," she said slowly and distinctly. "Je-be-di-i-yah!"

A muscle leaped in Amity's groin under the moving fingertip, and she brushed the hand away. "But you hardly know him," she teased, as if it mattered. "You've only seen him—"

"Saw enough of him. When Miss Lucy told me to take him something to eat this evening. I took him a bowl of broth. Had to spoon-feed him. He hardly woke up. Just laid there, half sitting, no shirt and clothes all undone, and

I saw just about everything he got. And, honey, he got it a-a-all."

Amity laughed. "You're an animal," she said. "Nothing but an animal."

"Guess that's sure right."

"Well . . . remember what I said this afternoon about if you're a good girl and behave yourself, maybe I'll give Jebediah to you?"

"I remember."

"Want him?"

Leila's smile faded. "How you mean?"

"Well, you ain't no pickaninny no more, honey child. About time you had some pickaninnies of your own. Can't let a good-looking colored gal like you go to waste."

"You mean . . . marry up with him?"

"Of course I mean marry up with him."

"Well, I don't want to marry up!" Leila's voice shook, and there was fear in her eyes. Amity would have been annoyed if the fear hadn't been oddly amusing.

"Can't have you living in sin," she giggled.

"Don't care. I don't want to do anything that means leaving you! I been with you long as I remember. Played with you, ate with you, slept in your room with you—"

"You can't sleep in my room after I'm married. At least not very often."

"Don't care. When you marry up, I want to go with you."

"And you will, Leila, you will! And so will whoever you marry—as long as you marry the right person."

Leila stared at her. "You mean, if I marry who you say—if I marry Jebediah—you take us both with you?"

"The three of us. Together."

Leila stared a moment longer, then looked aside. She shook her head ruefully. "But I don't even hardly know him," she mumbled.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Leila!" Amity was abruptly irritated. Opposition made her determined. "He's the best looking black boy at Sabrehill. What more do you want?"

Leila didn't answer. She shook her head, then laughed. "What's the matter?"

"Oh, I was just thinking. You said us three together, and all of a sudden I thought of you and me and Jebediah together in a bed, no room for poor Mr. Quentin."

"Leila, that's awful!" Without smiling, Amity slapped out at Leila's cheek. You had to keep a servant within bounds, even a privileged servant like Leila. "Don't you ever say such a thing again!"

"Yes'm. I'm sorry."

Leila smothered her laughter and resumed her massage, her hands moving expertly about Amity's neck. Amity closed her eyes and moved her hand blindly over Leila's body, seeking to return the pleasure. They really were animals, these niggers, she thought. Give them food and shelter, pet them from time to time, let them pleasure each other, and they were perfectly loyal and happy.

"What about you and Jebediah, then?"

"You really serious?"

"Course I am."

"Well, like you say, he's pretty, and that makes it nice to think about. So I'll think about it. But Jebediah, he might have some ideas his own, like another gal some place."

Amity reached up and touched Leila's breast. "Don't you think a gal like you could make him change his mind about that?"

Leila looked at the pink fingertip on her dark nipple. "Reckon maybe."

"Then you better do it. You have my permission."

The fingertips fell away. Amity drifted off in a sea of pleasure as the hands continued to work over her, but she did not think about that. She thought of the future months and what they would bring. She saw herself on the high circular piazza of Kimbrough Hall, looking down at her guests on the broad green park—herself, flanked by her two loyal Africans. Yes, everything was working out so beautifully. She smiled.

"Leila," she murmured as she pulled her gown up, "let's make it real nice tonight."

He had the instincts of one who had survived a thousand nights of terror. Suddenly a dream of endless tor-

ment vanished, forgotten, and he was listening, still hardly awake, to the sound of footsteps on the cottage floor. Some combination of sounds from the outside—a boy's shout, the *baaing* of a sheep—told him it was morning. He awaited the shout, the blow.

"Hey, Jebby, you still asleep? Brought you some breakfast. Oh, your poor back."

It was all right. It was only the girl Leila.

And then it all came back to him. She had visited him in the night. He had heard the scratch and sizzle of a lucifer and had felt, more than seen, the flaring of candlelight. She had pulled off his brogans and unfastened the too-tight pants and had fed him the hot broth, which had burnt his ragged tongue. He had never really awakened, even at the crash of the door and the entrance of the overseer, but he dimly remembered that Turnage had read the law to Leila. The white people's law. *I am white, and therefore better than you. You are a common nigger. Remember that, or you'll be whipped, perhaps even killed. Remember.* "On the other hand, if you was to be nice to me . . ."

Jeb had understood. The overseer was putting a claim on Leila for himself. He could not force her—she was a house servant with a certain amount of protection—but he meant to have her. Jeb would be wise to stay clear of her.

But now it was morning, and she was with him again. He allowed himself to be roused up, if not fully awakened. His tongue was still raw, and every move was painful. The girl said something about his wanting to visit a "necessary house" first, and he allowed himself to be led through two small dusty rooms that appeared to have been long unoccupied. Outside, the day was already hot, and the sunlight was blinding.

When they returned, he settled back onto the bed, and she gave him a bowl of grits mixed with pork. He ate it slowly, washing it down with water. When he had finished, Leila had him lie face down on the bed while she poured an evil-smelling liniment on his back and rubbed it slowly, soothingly in.

"We gonna be good friends, you and me, Jebediah Not Mr. Turnage and me—you and me."

The pain of her strong grip soon became a pleasure, and again he drifted back into deep thoughtless sleep.

But not for long. At some point during the day footsteps and voices aroused him again. He lay perfectly still, eyes closed, barely awake.

Leila: "See what they done to the poor boy's back?"

A whimper. "That's terrible, terrible!" The northern sound: the girl called Dulcy.

"No wonder he run. Somebody scar me up like that, I run too."

"But he must have done something terribly wrong."

"How so? I ask Cheney, how come that Jebediah got whipped till he run away? Don't he do his work? He says, sure he do his work. But the women always looking at him, they don't do *their* work. Besides, he talks educated, and that makes Mr. Turnage mad. So Cheney says, we whip the shit out of him. Make him an example for the others. Now, I ask you, Miss Dulcy, what did this boy do that was so terribly wrong?"

"Nothing, I guess."

"Course not. Trouble is, all you know is places that're like Sabrehill used to be before you went up north. But I've talked to a lot of people from other places, and most of them ain't like that. Overseer gets down on you, you're gonna wish you was dead!"

"I guess there's a lot I don't know."

"Sabrehill got worse every year since Mr. Turnage came here, but it still ain't like some places I heard about."

He was still safe, safe enough to slip further into sleep again. Leila said something about cleaning the place up, and there was a rattling around him, footsteps, occasional humming. Scraps of conversation. Arousing from time to time, he got the impression that the girl Dulcy was working with Leila, or at least assisting her in some way, and that seemed odd. Why would a nice young white lady do such menial work?

Leila: "Guess that's good enough for now. Anyway, it's almost supper time."

Dulcy: "He surely doesn't look very comfortable in those tight pants."

Leila: (Giggle.) "We can fix that."

He felt a light blanket being tossed over him. Then two hands gripped each of his pant legs. Seconds later, only the blanket covered him.

"So you're awake!"

"Barely."

As Leila lit the lamp—it was new to the room—Jeb eased up in bed, being careful of his back. The room looked quite different now: clean and orderly and ready to be inhabited again. Beside the bed, there was a small table, a couple of chairs, and a large wardrobe. The windows had been washed, and even the fireplace appeared to have been cleaned.

"Brought you some nice food."

It was indeed nice: ham, gravy, sweet potatoes, and succotash. He had not had such a meal in years.

"And something nice for after your supper," Leila said. "It'll ease all them pains and help you sleep again. I stole it."

The "something nice" was a cup of brandy. From the bouquet, Jeb knew it would be excellent.

"Glory hallelujah."

"Eat!"

As he ate, Jeb looked about the room some more. "The place looks different," he said.

"It should. Dulcy and me, we worked our asses off cleaning it up for you."

"I don't understand that. I mean I don't understand a white missy like your Miss Dulcy doing such a thing. Why?"

Leila, sitting nearby in a chair, was wearing nothing but a white cotton shift, suitable for working, and when she shrugged, her breasts moved under it prettily. She crinkled her nose. "I don't know. She got a good heart, but I think she's childish. She still hangs around the kitchen the way she done when she was a pickaninny. Even friendly with some of the field hands. Maybe it's

because her momma died when she was real young, and she never really grewed up."

Leila was turning out to be quite a friend. The information she could give him might prove valuable.

"What about Miss Lucy? Tell me about Miss Lucy."

Leila shrugged again. "Old maid. She keeps house for Mr. Aaron and Mr. Joel. She's real smart, and she ain't mean but maybe once a month."

"And Miss Amity?"

Something hardened in Leila's eyes, became wary, and for a moment Jeb didn't think she was going to answer. But then she said, "Miss Amity and me been friends for a long time. We even sleep in the same room."

"She treat you all right?"

"Mostly. When she don't get into a temper."

"Kindly like Miss Lucy? Childish like Miss Dulcy?"

"Smart. Mr. Joel, he says she's about the only female he ever knew with a head for business. He says she knows more about running a plantation than Miss Lucy and Dulcy put together. Oh, Miss Amity is smart all right. Reckon she'll marry Mr. Quentin Kimbrough, and the Kimbrough place will be more hers than his."

Jeb sensed that Leila had reservations about Miss Amity but that she was unwilling to state them. Miss Amity was her "friend," her protection, and that was something she would not want to risk. He could understand that.

He finished the meal and took a sip of the brandy. It was as good as he had expected, far better than anything he had had since his first master had sold him. With a comfortable sigh, he lay back on his side, carefully, against his pillows.

"Feel better now?" Leila asked, smiling.

"Much better." Yes, he thought, she was undoubtedly the most beautiful girl he had ever known. "You've been very nice to me, Leila."

Leila stood up from her chair. The lamplight caught the roundness of breast and belly, the sleekness of thigh, as she swayed toward him. The display was purposeful. The nipples were taut. She stood for a moment, letting

him stare, then lowered herself to the edge of the bed.

She placed a hand lightly on his chest. "I could be nicer," she said.

His breath caught. He tried to conceal his excitement with a weary smile. "But I couldn't be very nice to you. Not yet."

"You sure about that?" Her hand moved under the edge of the blanket, and he had to stop her.

"Leila, honey," he said, holding back her hand, "all I know is, if I tried it right now, it would kill me."

She leaned toward him, smiling slightly, trying to free her hand from his grip. Her breasts touched his chest, and he nearly let go of her hand. But she relaxed and drew back from him.

"All right," she said, "we let you rest up some more. Wouldn't want to kill you, would we? But don't make Leila wait too long, candy man."

In answer, he raised her hand, the hand he was holding captive, and kissed it. She smiled again and stood up from the bed.

When she had turned out the lamp and left the cottage, he sipped his brandy in the dark and wondered if he had not been a fool. It had been a long time since he had had a woman, and the need she had aroused was painful. And if she were really determined to have him, how long could he hold her off? But the instinct was to remain free of emotional ties, and certainly to avoid a situation that might cause further difficulty with the overseer.

I'm going to escape, he thought. This time I'm going to get away.

He had had more than four years of hell, four years of hatred and pain and madness, in which hardly a day passed when he had not felt the whip at least once. He had seen his father maddened, his mother degraded, both parents dead. He had lived in a world that allowed thought for little but physical agony and the need to escape it. Time and again he had run as much in hope of a few days respite from the whip as in hope of freedom, and always he had known there was worse torture than ever waiting for him at the end of his run. There

had been no chance to think, no chance to plan—not even the ability to think and plan, he had been so maddened by grief and the whip.

But somehow he had survived that. And suddenly he found himself out from under the whip. He would have time to think and plan now. He would take advantage of his position in the big house. There might be a library with maps in it, and there would certainly be talk of abolitionists—perhaps there would be clues to escape routes. He would not make the mistake of being hurried and spoiling an opportunity, and he would curb the pride that had kept him going even as it had increased his torture.

Yes, he would escape. And somehow, deep within, sickeningly, he knew this was his last chance. He was, after all, only a man, and a man could take only so much. And he had seen many a slave broken, never to run again.

Now it might be his turn.

Four

Dulcy Sabre was a loving person. From her earliest childhood she had sought to confer love—which she thought of as pleasure—and, just as eagerly, to receive it. That anyone might not wish to love and be loved seemed to her incredible, and when her efforts were rebuffed, she was dumbfounded.

As a result of running free in the slave quarters, she was, for a white girl, sexually precocious. The white society in which she lived was repressive and puritanical, especially where white women were concerned, but the black society was not. Far from being unclean or degraded, sexuality was regarded as the greatest pleasure one could take and the sweetest gift that one could give. Sexual conquest among the young, far from being a depravity, was regarded as a legitimate way of gaining status. The Saturday night dancing was frankly sexual, and Dulcy became quite aware that couples went off together in the darkness to “pleasure” and to “do it.” Occasionally she wandered into some laughing couple, dimly

seen, and by the time she entered puberty, sex had virtually no shock-value for her—certainly less than for the average white male of the same age. She had once overheard one of Amity's beaux mutter to another, "Why, I was seventeen years old before I even knew white gals had pussies." Dulcy was quite aware that she had a pussy, and she had a sound general idea of what it was for.

And yet, for all her precocity, she did not really relate the mechanics of sex to herself, and she was fourteen years old before her longings became completely specific. It happened during the spring, a few weeks before Amity's attack on her at the river.

She had a way of attaching herself to older couples, and that spring she was particularly fond of Wayland, the blacksmith's boy, and Isa, the gardener's daughter. They were an exceptionally handsome couple and obviously deeply in love with each other, and Dulcy, in love with love, took to following them everywhere. When Wayland was helping Isa in the kitchen garden, Dulcy was there helping too. When Wayland took Isa to parties in the quarters, Dulcy went with them. The couple sometimes had difficulty being alone together.

Thus when they decided to go swimming on that Sunday afternoon, Dulcy was with them. There were several streams where they might have gone, but they wanted to avoid other swimmers, so they went to their own favorite place, a pool in a grove far to the west of the big-house quarters.

They swam in their clothes, Dulcy and Isa in old shifts, Wayland in an old ragged pair of pants, and for a time it was very pleasant. They paddled about in the sun-and-shade dappled water, splashed each other, shouted insults, played a game of tag. Then suddenly Dulcy got the unpleasant feeling that she was not really wanted by the others. The feeling came as Isa, trying to struggle free from Wayland's arms, shouted, "Now, don't you act like that in front of Dulcy-child!" But Isa—giggling, teasing, nipples taut under her wet shift—was clearly enjoying Wayland's arms.

They wanted to be alone. Without her. She was excluded.

Trying to maintain a cheerful face, she said she had had enough of swimming; she was going back to the house. Wayland and Isa weakly urged her to stay, but their obvious lack of enthusiasm for her presence drove her away all the faster. As she departed, she heard their privately shared laughter behind her.

She could not have said what made her return to the stream. She had been gone about five minutes, when, heart thumping, she turned around and walked slowly back.

She approached the stream by a slightly different route than they had followed before, moving silently through the hot, quiet afternoon. Every step was carefully made, for she would have felt disgraced if they had seen her. She listened for their voices, but the woods were quiet.

They were no longer at the pool when she arrived there.

Some instinct guided her. She crossed the stream. One slow step at a time, she explored, going where she thought they might have gone. And she found them.

They were in a pleasant little glade not far from the stream. Completely naked now, they lay on their sides facing each other, Isa's upper leg thrown high over Wayland's side. Entangled, they held and caressed each other, kissed from time to time, and moved together in slow rhythm.

Too fascinated to be ashamed, too fascinated and aroused, Dulcy watched. Never before had she seen so clearly, never before had she understood so well. She watched, and she listened to the liquid sounds of love and the whispered endearments. She watched until the final violent moment, and she listened to the gentle laughter that followed, while the lovers still lay linked together.

Dulcy slipped quietly away, afraid of being caught. She was not afraid of punishment—she would have been teased badly, nothing more—but she had to absorb her new knowledge. Because she knew now what she wanted—what she had wanted for a long time.

She wanted to do what Isa and Wayland did. She

wanted to roll naked in the grass with a young man. She wanted to have and to be had.

But not just any young man would do. No, it had to be someone very special, someone as special to her as Isa and Wayland were to each other. Nothing, it seemed to Dulcy, could possibly be more exciting and precious than that. It was as if she had discovered the secret of life, the one thing worth living and dying for.

From that day on, Dulcy looked for her special person, but in over three years she did not find him. There were plenty of males who excited her—as she confided to Lucy, “Sometimes a handsome man just turns me inside out!”—but none who seemed more special than the last. Then one day she thought she might have found such a person, a young man she had known all her life. Unfortunately, his name was Quentin Kimbrough.

Quentin arrived soon after breakfast. It was unusual for him to call at Sabrehill so early, and Dulcy, observing from a north parlor window, felt her heart give an excited little lurch. Quentin cut quite a figure, riding up the avenue of oaks on his tall horse. He was ostensibly dressed for work in the fields—in shirt sleeves, his tieless, flaring white collar framing his handsome face. His broad-brimmed hat was black, not very sensible for the hot sun, but matching his black riding pants and boots. He wore a pistol on his right hip, and holster, saddle, and boots glistened in the morning sunlight. Dust arose from the stamping hooves of his high-stepping mount, but not one speck seemed to settle on him. Oh, yes, Mr. Quentin Kimbrough cut quite a figure, Dulcy thought, far more exciting than any she had seen in Boston. She hurried out of the house to meet him.

“Hey, there, little Dulcy,” he called out as he reined up his horse.

“Quentin Kimbrough, what are you doing here at this hour of the day?”

“Just happened to be working over this way. Thought I might as well stop by and pay my respects.”

The fabrication was transparent. The Kimbrough fields were a considerable distance away, and Quentin must

have made the long ride out of a desire to see Amity.
Or me, Dulcy thought.

"Well, stay awhile and have some coffee."

"Don't mind if I do."

Quentin swung a long and undeniably attractive leg over his horse, and Dulcy felt an odd flutter within. She could not help noticing how his pants hugged his neat hips and thighs, how his deep chest filled out his white shirt. He came down off of his horse with a fleet dancing step and walked toward her with a grace that few men possessed. *Adonis*, she thought, *loved by both Aphrodite and Persephone*. A great many young women were attracted to Quentin, and Dulcy understood why.

He whipped off his hat; again, the gesture was graceful—graceful and dramatically effective. Tying his horse to a post was another small piece of drama; he did it with a flourish, at the same time turning his face to give her his most charming boyish smile.

"My, my, Dulcy, can't get over it. Gonna have to start calling you *Miss Dulcy*, even when we're alone like this. Can't get over the way you're all grown up."

Dulcy felt herself blushing. She couldn't help it. Surely Quentin was merely saying the conventional thing, speaking the glib formulas that gentlemen used with the ladies. Yet his words, his tone, a sparkle in his brown eyes, did something to her.

"Well, you—you've done some growing, too, Mr. Quentin," she said, flustered.

"Honey, when you left to go up North, I was already doing the things a man does. You were still just a little girl, no more'n fourteen." Quentin lowered his voice in a way that spoke worlds. "But Dulcy, honey, you ain't a little girl no more."

No, Quentin was not merely saying the conventional thing. Suddenly Dulcy knew that he had come, not to see Amity, but to see her. And that was wrong.

"Let's go into the house," she said. "There's coffee—"

"No, wait."

When he took both of her hands in his, a shock went through her, and her knees began to tremble.

"Come on in. I'll call Amity—"

"I don't want to talk to Amity. I want to talk to you. Dulcy, we must have been together a half-dozen times or more since you got home, but we hardly had a chance to talk at all."

She tried to laugh. "Now, what would we have to say to each other, Mr. Quentin Kimbrough?"

"Please."

Oh, lordy, she thought, if only my papa knew what a good-looking man can do to me, he'd get me married off like a shot! I am no good, no good.

"Quentin!" She tried to draw her hands away.

"A talk. Just a few minutes together. A walk through the gardens. Is that so much to ask? I want to remember how you were when you were little, how I played with you and teased you and mended your doll . . ."

The soft words seduced her; the hands worked their magic. He made her stand close to him, and—didn't he know what he was doing to her?—the shaking in her legs increased, the heat welled up. The soft gaze that drifted over her made her conscious of her body, conscious of his, conscious of what she really wanted.

"Dulcy!"

It was Amity's voice, hard and sharp, and Dulcy welcomed it. Quentin's hands slipped away from hers. She turned slowly, feeling groggy, dazzled by the sunlight.

"Dulcy, you come in here. I want to talk to you a minute."

When she saw Dulcy coming, Amity disappeared back into the house. Dulcy followed. Quentin remained behind.

Amity led the way through the hall out onto the piazza. When she whirled around, hands on hips, the hardness of her gray-blue eyes was like a blow.

"And now, little sister, just what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Why, I—I wasn't—"

"You were, and you always do, every time Quentin comes over here."

"I don't know what you mean!"

Amity's voice was low and fierce. "Let's get something straight between us. Whether you know it or not, Mr.

Quentin Kimbrough is not here to see you. He never has been, and he never will be. I know you'd like to change that—"

"Why, that's not true!"

"—but don't you try it. You ain't fourteen no more, Dulcy, and I won't play games with you, pushing you in the river. You just keep your fancy butt away from Quentin, or I'll take care of you. One way or another. I'll make you wish you had never come back from the North. Do you understand me?"

"Amity, really, I never—"

"*Do you understand me?*"

"Yes, yes, I understand, but—"

"Good. Don't you never forget. Because if you do, I swear to God I'll have your ass. I'll make you pay."

Amity went to the door. Throwing a last hard look of contempt over her shoulder, she muttered, "Why the hell did you ever have to come back here?" and reentered the house.

Dulcy's heart pounded far harder than when Quentin had held her hands. She had never gotten along well with Amity, had never been close to her, but for the first time in her life she realized that her sister had always hated her. No, had not always hated her, that was not what the hard eyes had said—they had said that Amity simply did not give one damn about her except insofar as she got in Amity's way. *Then* Amity hated her. Hatred was the only emotion her sister was capable of feeling for her.

Amity *really had* tried to kill her on that summer afternoon three years ago.

And was capable of trying again.

Dulcy stood utterly still in the shade of the piazza, feeling sick, feeling guilty. A long white cloud in the sky lay still. The dark river down below was silent. The only sound, the only movement was the thudding of her heart. She was guilty because, though she had certainly not led him on, she *was* violently attracted to Quentin. She was guilty because as a child she *had* teased Amity and drawn the attention of her sister's beaux to herself. She was guilty because she loved her sister and had failed to draw love in return. She was a young woman who needed love.

She began to cry. She needed her mother, but her mother was long dead. She needed her father, but he was in the fields. And Lucy was busy, always busy.

"Momma," she moaned, "Momma," meaning her Momma Lucinda. She fought back tears and went back into the house. She had to find her Momma Lucinda—there would be sanctuary in the kitchen. Maybe Irish would be there, too, her slave brother, the only brother she had ever had. And then afterwards she would go out to the spinning house and talk to the old ladies. She loved the old ladies and thought that they loved her. And right now she needed love.

Escape was his first thought on awakening. Wait a month or a year if you have to, wait five years, but learn what you need to know, watch for your chance, and escape.

He saw by the light that they had let him sleep late. He sat up slowly, carefully, his back still painful but improved. Looking about the bedroom, he discovered that he had been provided with two large pitchers of water, basins, a bar of soap, and a sharp, if ancient, razor. There was also a pile of clean rags for washing and toweling. He barbered himself before a cracked mirror—he had almost forgotten how to use a razor—and washed the stink of liniment and stale sweat from his body. He put on the clothes he had been given. Then, ravenous, he walked unsteadily to the mansion kitchen, where he found Miss Lucy conferring with the cook.

She noted his unsteadiness. "Are you feeling better this morning?" She seemed genuinely concerned, but why not? He was a costly piece of property who must earn his keep.

"Somewhat better, thank you, ma'am."

"I think you had best spend the day resting and getting acquainted with the people and the general situation here, Jebediah. You won't be much help until you know your way around. And of course you'll have to be measured for some new clothes. We can't have you running around looking like *that*."

"No, ma'am."

Leila had appeared in the doorway to the portico.

"By the way," Miss Lucy went on, "my sister, Miss Amity, has suggested that you train Leila here. Supposedly Leila is a maid, but actually she's more of a personal servant to Miss Amity." Miss Lucy's tone suggested that in her view Leila was not much of anything. "Leila can help you to get used to our ways, so you'll really be helping each other."

"I'll teach her all I can, ma'am."

Leila lifted an eyebrow over a mischievous eye, and her tongue poked her cheek.

"And Jebediah, I want you to know that you don't always have to be a houseboy. If you do very well, we'll call you the butler or even the majordomo."

The lady meant it kindly, but he felt the sting of being patronized. Nevertheless, he bowed slightly and smiled and said, "I shall aspire to that, Miss Lucy, ma'am." He even managed to say it without sounding snotty.

"And now I want you to meet Momma Lucinda and her son, Irish. . . ."

When he had finished his breakfast, Leila and Irish showed him the house.

"I heard tell it's a lot like Mount Vernon," Leila said. "But it was finished first, so people around here say the General modeled his house on this one. But Mr. Aaron says, he dunno—how many different ways can you lay out rooms?"

"What I never could understand," Irish said, "is why they call it *Sabrehill*. How come *hill*?"

"Why, because it's *built* on a hill, gooberhead!"

"A *hill*? You call this little rise a *hill*?"

"It's like a hill over the river. I swear, you got a brain slow as a *cooter*."

The house was larger than any other Jeb had ever been in. The west wing of the first floor contained the library, the pantry and dining room, and a bed chamber. In the east wing were a couple of parlors and a large ballroom. Besides the large staircase in the central hall, or passage, there were secondary staircases in the southwest and northeast corners. On the second floor, Aaron Sabre's

three rooms were over the library, Joel Sabre's over the ballroom. In between the two suites were four bedrooms, three of them occupied by the Sabre sisters. "I got my bed in Miss Amity's room," Leila said. "Sleep there except when she's mad at me."

On the third floor, under the roof, were a number of storerooms and spare bedrooms. "Used to be they was used sometimes by servants, sometimes by guests. Now we don't hardly have guests, and no servants in the house unless you count me. But Momma Lucinda told me that long ago, before I was born, Mr. Aaron and his first wife, Miss Vesta, they had guests all the time. People came from miles around and stayed for weeks and weeks. Some of them was real famous people, and that made Sabrehill famous too. It was a real honor to be invited to Sabrehill. But then Miss Vesta died, and Mr. Aaron didn't want no more guests, and they stopped coming.

"Momma Lucinda told me Mr. Aaron went traveling after that, let Mr. Joel run Sabrehill all by hisself. Went to Charleston and New Orleans and Boston and New York and I don't know where all. Everybody thought he never would get over losing Miss Vesta, but I guess he did, 'cause he come home with a nice new wife. That was Miss Faith, who was Dulcy's momma. I remember her good—she looked sorta like Dulcy, and she was sweet and shy like she was scared of people. Didn't go out much, didn't have nobody in, didn't go to Charleston summers, like so many white folks do. And I guess she was sickly, 'cause after a time she died off, too. Consumption got her, and there was poor Mr. Aaron without no wife again. He didn't run off that time, but Momma Lucinda said he couldn't bear losing no more wives, so he never married again."

Leila led the way out through the south door. As Jeb had guessed, there was a large piazza, roofed and eight-pillared, facing a long green slope down to the river and the wharf known as Sabre's Landing. The mansion was flanked by extensive formal gardens, each with its gazebo, and in one of them Jeb saw Miss Lucy and a black man at work. "Reckon nothing ain't as special to Miss

Lucy as her flowers and such," Leila said. "You find her working out there all the time."

They went around the west end of the mansion. Near Jeb's cottage was a cluster of small buildings: ice house, smoke house, gardener's cottage, spinning house, wash house. A service lane ran between them. Farther to the west were a long brick building, called the big-house quarters, and several small guest houses, long unused.

In the spinning house they found Dulcy Sabre, as well as three old women busy at their wheels and looms. The old women marveled at his size, clucking and cooing as they expertly took his measurements, while Dulcy-child, as they called her, chattered brightly. Too brightly, Jeb thought. Her eyes were red and there was a catch in her voice, as if she had recently been weeping. But his first impression of her had been right: dark-eyed and ripe-lipped, she was richly, sensuously beautiful, the kind of white woman a black man had best stay clear of.

Dulcy, however, had no intention of being avoided. Taking Jeb's arm, she led the way out of the spinning house, Leila and Irish following. "My sister Lucy told me you're very bright," she said, "and probably very well educated."

"I'm glad," Jeb said cautiously, "if that means Miss Lucy approves of me."

"What it means, if Papa gets the idea you can take care of yourself, in time he might give you your freedom."

There it was, Jeb thought bitterly, the hope of freedom that was supposed to keep you a nice darky, docile and tractable. If you bowed and scraped and smiled, if you dandled the white children on your knee, if you showed what a loyal and loving darky servant you were, when you reached sixty or seventy years, ole massa jess might set you free. Oh, hebben, hebben, hebben. Jeb refrained from asking how many slaves the Sabres had actually freed over the years. There was no need. He had heard the same promise from kindly old Mr. Pinkham, and look what *he* had done.

There were dozens of things he wanted to know, a hundred questions he wanted to ask, but he did not. He

listened and watched. They crossed the courtyard, Dulcy leading him, her breast occasionally a troublesome warmth against his arm. Following the east service lane, they passed between the overseer's house on the right and a storehouse on the left. A few feet further along the lane, the buzz of a saw came from the carpenter shop and the clang of a hammer on an anvil from the blacksmith shop. Then came the coach house and the stable and paddock, and, still farther, a large brick barn. The plantation headquarters was like a small village: Jeb figured there were about two dozen outbuildings within sight of the big house.

They stopped, talked to people, walked on. Jeb's earlier impressions were confirmed. Though Sabrehill did raise some rice on one distant tract, it was mainly a cotton plantation. This plus the sparsity of palmettos and the little Gullah spoken suggested to Jeb that the plantation was somewhat inland. But surely, he thought, they were not in the high country.

The day stretched on, warm and leisurely, unlike anything Jeb had experienced in years. A kind of comfortable dozing silence seemed to stretch over Sabrehill, punctuated now and then by a clatter from one of the shops, a man's laugh, a child's distant shout. They returned to the kitchen for something to eat, then walked down to Sabre's Landing. They walked through the woods to the stream where Irish said they sometimes went swimming. In spite of his painfully stiff back and his growing fatigue, Jeb's years in the field began to seem like a distant dream.

In the middle of the afternoon, the little group broke up, and Jeb returned to his cottage to rest. When he awakened, dusk had fallen, and he sensed activity outside the cottage. There were new sounds; voices were raised. The hands were coming out of the fields, and the dinner hour had arrived.

He walked to the kitchen and found that Leila had been about to come fetch him. She brought out two plates of food—good food—and they ate together sitting on the west doorstep of the kitchen. Jeb remembered when he had had to eat mush from a shingle, or even directly from his own hands, without benefit of a spoon.

When they had finished and Leila had washed their plates, Dulcy joined them. To Jeb's surprise, she suggested a walk out to the quarters. For his own part, he had no wish ever to see the quarters again, but he was willing to go along, and he soon rediscovered something he had forgotten: the special status of the house servant. He could sense it as they walked about the dark square. A house servant might not be trusted—he was truly a white man's darky—but he was envied and even, reluctantly, admired. He was a figure of prestige. Jeb might have come to Sabrehill as a field hand, he might have run away and been caught and whipped, but what of it? He was now a house servant, and that was what counted.

When they returned to the big house, Mr. Turnage was sitting on his porch, a cup in one hand and a pipe in the other, his chair tilted back against the wall. He said nothing, didn't move, and the others went by him without speaking.

Dulcy said good night and went toward the big house. Jeb and Leila continued slowly around the far side of the courtyard toward his cottage.

"What has she got on her mind?" he asked. Turnage's eyes seemed to be drilling into his back.

"Now, honey child, you had her titty on your arm half the day, and you should see her with her beaux. You got to *know* what she's got on her mind."

"No. It's something more than that."

They reached his door. Over her shoulder he could dimly see Mr. Turnage in the darkness of his porch.

Leila moved closer to him.

"Feeling better than you did?" she asked softly.

"Some."

She reached down between them, and he jumped at the shock of her touch.

"Oh, you're feeling much better," she said, pleased. "Want me to come in for a little while?"

"Now, Leila—"

"Yes, I guess you do want me to," she laughed, grabbing at him. "Oh, just lookee, you do indeed!"

He struggled to escape her seeking hands. "Leila, please—"

"Yes, you poor thing, you need Leila so bad—"

He choked on his own laughter. How long since he had last laughed? "Leila, my back! *I couldn't do it!*"

His hands holding her wrists, she leaned close to him, whispering. "You don't have to do it. You just rest your poor back, and your little Leila will do *e-e-everything!*"

"Leila, damn it, don't you know Mr. Turnage is watching?"

She pulled back, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "You scared of Mr. Turnage?"

"You're damn right I'm scared of Mr. Turnage. Do you think I don't know he's got you marked out as his own?"

Suddenly the sparkle and the smile were gone. The eyes were hard with defiance, the mouth twisted by sullen anger.

"You weren't so asleep after all, huh? Well, I ain't his own. I'm *my* own."

"A slave?"

"*My own!*"

The defiance was implacable, and Jeb had the feeling that a mask had been dropped and that he was seeing the true Leila for the first time. This wasn't the silly little housemaid he had first seen, this was no fawning body servant. This was a survivor like himself, struggling to maintain some inner freedom, no matter what the odds.

He said, "I like you, Leila. You're my kind."

The hardness gradually left her face, and something close to a smile appeared.

"Then how come you don't want to?" she asked.

He dared not tell her the whole truth, but he could tell her something akin to it. "Because I might come to like you too much. And I decided a long time ago that I would never marry a woman who lived on the same plantation with me. I couldn't stand to see her whipped. Or have my children see me whipped. Better to see them only twice a year than to have to go through that."

She looked incredulous. "But you're a house servant now. House servants don't get whipped at Sabrehill. You nothing to fear."

"Maybe not. But let me wait and see. Let me bide my time."

Leila laughed and shook her head. She seemed to be trying to make up her mind about something.

"I'll tell you a secret if you don't give me away."

"I won't, I promise."

"You're right to think a woman could tie you down, and that's what Miss Amity wants. Wants to tie you down with me, so we're both her servants."

"You mean . . . she sent you to me?"

Leila nodded. "I didn't want to, even though you are pretty. Don't like to be told who my man's got to be. But then I got to know you and didn't mind so much. But of course I know I couldn't keep you here. When you gonna make your run, Jeb?"

The question was like an unexpected blow to the face. It was a moment before he could speak.

"What made you say that?"

Leila laughed. "Aw, come on, honey, you ain't talking to white folks. Even they ought to know you're a runner, with that back of yours. And the way you're listening, hardly ever talking, careful with your questions. The way you don't want to be tied down with me. Little Leila ain't a fool."

No. Little Leila was no fool.

"What if I told you I wasn't a runner anymore because I don't dare to be?" Jeb found his voice was shaking.

"What if I told you they've done far worse things to me than my back shows? That if I take one more beating like some I've had, I won't be a man anymore? That I'll be better off dead?"

"Well, then," Leila said slowly, "I'd say you better make the next run a good one, because I sure wouldn't want to see that happen to you."

"Leila, please, don't talk about this to anyone."

"Aw, now, I ain't gonna say nothing to nobody." She touched his cheek. "Poor pretty. They made you so scared. But don't be scared of Leila. She ain't gonna hold you here. Sure you don't want me to come in for a while?"

He could not help glancing over her shoulder toward Turnage. She saw it. She shook her head, and her laugh

was sad. "All right, not tonight. But some night, maybe, when we both want. And then the hell with goddam Turnage."

She kissed her fingertips and touched them to his cheek once again, then turned and walked toward the kitchen.

Jeb entered his cottage and closed the door. He walked through the two dark rooms and fell onto the bed without lighting the lamp.

Yes, he thought, maybe he was a fool. Leila was a beautiful girl and no fool at all, and he could have her. Together they might have a good life here, far better than that of many a poor white. The food was good, they would be well clothed, the cottage was the best home he had had since the Pinkham mansion. There would be no more whippings. There would be some kind of security, even some kind of happiness.

Everything he had had when he had belonged to the Pinkhams.

Everything that had proved to be an illusion.

They could promise you so much. Escape from the fields. The most beautiful black female on the plantation. Prestige among the other blacks. Even eventual freedom. And then, with a smile or a tear, they could take it all away from you.

And why should he accept their bounty after all they had done to him? Why should he accept anything less than the freedom they owed him?

No, there was no temptation. The necessary madness, the arrogance, the defiance, was still there intact. He would remain hard, unloving, untouched by any wise Leila or innocent Dulcy. He would remain alone, watching for his chance.

Candle in hand, she went to Dulcy's room. If her suspicions were correct, she had little to offer other than pain.

Dulcy was still awake. She lay on her bed, behind the mosquito bar, but a lamp still burned on a nearby table. Lucy blew out her candle and sat down facing the bed. Dulcy didn't move.

"Now," Lucy said, "I want you to tell me what happened this morning."

"Nothing happened. I don't know what you—"

"You can tell me, dear, and I think you had better."

"But what makes you think—"

"I know you. And I know Amity. And I think I know Quentin pretty well too. Something happened, and this is the first chance I've had to ask."

For a moment she thought Dulcy was not going to reply. The younger woman buried her face in the curve of her arm.

"Amity thought I was flirting with Quentin."

"And were you?"

"I don't know. I didn't mean to."

Once Lucy would have accepted the answer. Now she was not so sure.

"Dulcy, why are you hiding your face?"

Dulcy lay perfectly still, a length of white behind the white netting.

"Because I hurt," she said at last.

"Hurt? Why should you hurt?"

"I think I love Quentin."

Lucy had a drowning sensation, a feeling of sinking into darkness. *Oh, lord*, she thought, *not that*. It was as bad as she had feared.

She opened the netting and climbed onto the bed with Dulcy. Dulcy immediately threw herself into Lucy's arms as if to hide there. Lucy stroked her sister's dark hair.

"Now, listen to me. You must know that you cannot love Quentin."

"But I can't help it!"

"You know you must help it."

"But would it be so bad?"

"It would be very bad. Dulcy, nothing has changed in the last three years. Everything is exactly as it was three years ago, except that we're all a little older. And everything must go exactly as planned. You must discourage Quentin—"

"But I can't, you don't know what he does to me—"

"*You must*. You're not playing a child's game any longer. Forget Quentin, leave him to Amity, let Amity

have her way. I imagine she'll marry him by autumn; if not him, then someone else. And you'll find someone else, and I . . . I don't matter. I'll be all right. There may be some nastiness. I imagine there will be, but we'll all survive. But we depend on you, Dulcy, to do nothing foolish. Do you understand?"

Still buried in Lucy's arms, Dulcy nodded.

"Sleep, now. And don't even think about Quentin."

What a foolish admonition, Lucy thought, as her sister slowly withdrew from her and stretched out on the bed again. How could she not think of Quentin? The child would lie here on her lonely bed and suffer, unable to still her imagination. Lucy knew what it was to need and to be alone.

And that was the danger. How ironic, she thought, that all their plans should be threatened by a young girl's love.

She got off of the bed and arranged the netting. She relit her candle from the lamp, then put the lamp out. She whispered good night and left the room.

It was going to be all right, she assured herself as she went through the hall, everything was going to be all right. Her father had managed things nicely for years, and nothing was going to go wrong now. Her father was, after all, Aaron Sabre of Sabrehill, descended from generations of aristocrats, a man whose word was law, and that, too, was their shield.

Nothing too bad could happen.

Five

The library. He had to find a way to be alone there, repeatedly and for hours if necessary. If there were any maps in the house, he would surely find them in the library, and he had to locate himself precisely and study the possible escape routes. Never again would he run blindly, certainly not on the last run of all.

It was incredible, but he actually knew more about the geography of Europe than he did of the United States. What states lay between South Carolina and New York? North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland . . . what others? He realized now how carefully geographical knowledge was kept from slaves. Even on the Pinkham plantation, even from himself, Jebediah Hayes, who had supposedly been so trusted. Surely, with his vast hunger for knowledge, the absence of the information had not been accidental.

After his years in the fields, his life at Sabrehill seemed amazingly easy. Never in those years had he had so much time to himself, and yet, by accident or design, he was

never in the library alone. Someone, usually Miss Lucy, was always there with him, busily helping him dust shelves of books.

There was no opportunity in the morning. He arose before dawn and was soon serving breakfast. He dared not enter the library during breakfast; he could too easily be caught. Most of the housework was done in the morning, usually with Miss Lucy or a maid close at hand. Then, in the early afternoon, came a luncheon or, if Mr. Aaron or Mr. Joel were working nearby, a heavier dinner. When the table was cleared, there might follow more house chores, and then Miss Lucy would order him to his cottage, where he would either rest or take care of his own needs. Unless summoned earlier, he would not return to the big house until time for the evening meal. Soon afterwards he was usually allowed to return once again to his cottage.

The work of house servants was lighter than that of field hands, but they always had to hold themselves available. Field hands always were off from late Saturday afternoon through Sunday; house servants were not. Jeb would usually get a Sunday or a Monday off, Miss Lucy informed him, but he must always come at once at the ring of the bell.

Irish, supposedly useless for anything except mixing drinks, proved not to be useless after all. He liked Jeb and set about assisting him as best he could. "You gonna be the butler, and *me* the big old chief houseboy," he announced. Leila turned out to be a deft student who knew far more than she was given credit for, a fact that did not surprise Jeb. She made no further sexual advances, but she usually accompanied him back to the cottage in the afternoon to chat or to doze on his doorstep. If she was not with him, Irish or Dulcy was, and their presence did nothing to get him into that library.

The opportunity at last arrived on the second Saturday evening after he had started to work in the big house. Or perhaps it was less an opportunity, as he realized quite well, than a temptation.

Though she had wanted no special celebration of her return, the evening was Dulcy's. A trio of musicians had

been hired, and word had been sent out that all friends and neighbors would be welcome. The house was usually open on Saturday evenings, but this was the nearest Sabrehill had come to entertaining formally in years. Some who had already departed to spend the hot season in Charleston came all the way back for the occasion, and the house was filled.

Since the party was quite unorganized, it had the air of a family reunion. A few couples danced to the fiddling and thumping of the trio in the ballroom. Ladies gossiped in the hall and the north parlor. Children got underfoot. Young couples wandered off unchaperoned to the darkness of the gardens. Gentlemen picked up drinks at the bar which had been set up in the south parlor and wandered out to the barn, where Mr. Turnage was said to have a cock he was going to pit against the celebrated six-time winner, Scotch Devil.

The very informality of the evening kept Jeb busy, for rather than remaining on station, he had to move quickly throughout the house, seeing that all was well, that no want was unattended. At the same time, he tried to keep an eye on the north door in order to announce guests. But gradually, as the evening wore on, the work slowed down.

And at last he got his chance at the library.

A late-comer appeared at the door. He was a handsome, solidly built man in his early thirties. His thick mane of hair was completely white, and his deep-set eyes were intelligent and calculating. Jeb greeted him and, in a loud clear voice, announced his name: "Mr. Paul Devereau."

Miss Lucy appeared at once from the north parlor, and Mr. Devereau complimented her effusively. Too much so, Jeb thought. Mr. Aaron appeared from the south parlor. "Jeb, there's no need for you to watch the door any longer. But in about five minutes I'd like you to bring two whiskeys, neat, into the library."

Mr. Aaron took Mr. Devereau toward the library, Miss Lucy went back into the north parlor, and Jeb went to the south parlor for the drinks. Irish, almost as good a source of information as Leila, said that Mr. Devereau, like his

father before him, was the Sabres' lawyer and that he "got his eye on" Miss Lucy.

Jeb took the drinks on a silver tray, crossed the passage, and went through the bed chamber into the library. Mr. Aaron and Mr. Devereau were just rising from their chairs to leave. They took the drinks from Jeb's tray and, discussing land values, wandered out through the door that led to the dining room. Apparently his presence was forgotten.

And suddenly, at last, the library was his.

But for how long? His hands shook as he silently put the tray down on a table. The party tended to congregate on the piazza and in the parlors and ballroom of the other wing, but someone might wander this way at any time. And there were a thousand books, perhaps ten thousand, and a long cabinet with banks of drawers, and small closets and drawers underneath the shelves. . . .

At least he had some idea of where not to look. There was no large atlas on a table. Jeb had dusted the upper shelves and had sighted no book of maps there. What he wanted would be on the lower, more accessible shelves or in one of the drawers.

Best to keep the tray in hand. He would look more innocent: he had served drinks and was about to leave, right after the white gentlemen. Almost in a panic, he picked up the tray again and began to scan the lower shelves. But he forced himself to slow down and to look more carefully than he had ever dared in Miss Lucy's presence.

A shelf, another shelf. He saw nothing that might be helpful. The shelves had no principle of organization unless it was a private one: *Micromegas* stood by *Gulliver's Travels*, *Rasselas* by *Candide*, *Frankenstein* by *The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus*. He would have to go over the books one by one, and if he found nothing useful, go through each of the unlabeled drawers. And if he were caught, if anyone had the slightest suspicion of what he might be up to, he was finished. There would not be another chance. But if he just had enough time now—

"Jebediah, have you seen Mr. Quentin?"

He turned slowly. The tray was steady in his hand, but there was a pounding in his chest and head. From the dining room door, Miss Amity stared hard-eyed at him. He waited for the next question: *What are you doing in here? Why ain't you at work?*

Then, like a miracle, came the answer: three empty glasses on a small table beside a chair. Someone had been in the room earlier in the evening, and three glasses had been left behind. Jeb was merely clearing up as the party progressed. He took a few steps to the table and put one of the glasses on his tray.

"Jebediah, I *asked* you a question! Have you seen Mr. Quentin Kimbrough? The *younger* Mr. Kimbrough."

"Oh—I am sorry. No., ma'am. Not since much earlier in the evening, out in the passage."

Miss Amity wheeled and left.

Fear turned to anger, and a thin red glaze spread across Jeb's vision. The tray and glass rattled in his hands. He would have payment for these few seconds someday. Someday he would teach the meaning of fear.

He turned back to the book shelves.

The cocks were fighting-machines, mindless and deadly, bred to kill. As he hunched forward in the ring, Turnage felt Big Harpe, his black and red fighter, quivering between his hands, muscles tensing, ready to strike out with his steel spurs. Before him, the long-jawed, grinning Dr. Paulson leaned forward with Scotch Devil, his White Pile. There was absolutely nothing in Scotch Devil's eyes unless it was murder.

Held almost breast to breast, the cocks pecked at each other. If they were both game—and there was every reason to believe that they were—they were now enemies to the death. That was the way with the game cock: he existed to kill his own kind.

Most of the men who had come to Sabrehill that evening were in the barn. Aaron Sabre was not: he rarely attended cockfights. A number of blacks stood in the background, Sabrehill hands and servants of the visitors. Women were all but barred from the cockfights, since the sport was hardly ladylike, but Amity Sabre occasionally

appeared in the Sabrehill barn, and Leila was now observing over the shoulders of the men.

Turnage glanced at her. He would show her what men did. Real men, white men. As if he himself were the cock, he would show her blood and spurs and victory.

He and Dr. Paulson backed away from each other. It was no formal main that evening, just a few individual matches, of which this was the most looked forward to. Turnage and Dr. Paulson lowered the birds to their marks on the floor and held them, awaiting the signal.

Major Kimbrough, refereeing, gave it—a downstroke of his hand and a shout: “*Ya-a-a!*”

Released, the cocks leaped in the smoky light of the barn. They met in the air, spurs flaying, struck, and fell back. They circled on the ground, pecked at each other, then leaped again. They needed no further urging to fight. They had no other purpose, no other need, than to slash out, to rip and kill. Turnage and Dr. Paulson backed off, got away, left the cocks to their murder.

They whirled and leaped again, spurs slashing, feathers tearing away. At least a couple of thousand dollars was being wagered on this one fight, and a hundred of it was Turnage’s, all he felt he could afford. Big Harpe was his special pride, a three-time winner that got two-to-one against Scotch Devil. For a year he had been readying it for a fight like this: training it, grooming it, feeding it special cooked food and raw beef. For Scotch Devil was a champion, a direct descendent of the gamecocks of Dr. Bellyse, the famous English breeder.

The fight was short. With each leap, Big Harpe seemed to go a little higher, with each attack his gaffs seemed to flay more murderously. Never did he back off. He almost got over Scotch Devil, but not quite. Blood streaked the feathers of both birds, but neither faltered, and Big Harpe’s superior attack was never quite enough to make him the winner. The cries of the bettors filled the barn as they urged their favorites on.

Turnage glanced at Leila and saw that, in all the excitement, she was watching impassively, almost without interest.

And in that moment it was over.

Turnage could never be sure how it had happened. There was a tremendous flurry of trimmed wings as the birds came together in the air. Big Harpe still seemed to dominate the other bird, but then it was as if Scotch Devil were drilling into the dark feathers, gaffs slashing like daggers, dragging Big Harpe down, and suddenly blood was spraying about the ring, spraying across the low wooden barrier and onto white shirts, and Big Harpe was on the floor barely twitching. Scotch Devil leaped on him, sinking the gaffs behind the skull.

Dr. Paulson lifted Scotch Devil away. Big Harpe still had his chance if there was any life left in him.

There was none.

Turnage hardly heard the cheers, hardly heard the laughter and the congratulations to Scotch Devil's owner. He stared, unbelieving, at his own motionless bird. Then he went to it and picked it up gently.

A hand rested on his shoulder.

"Ah, that's too bad," Joel Sabre said.

"Yes, sir."

"That was a real fine bird."

"Yes, sir."

"Lost a hundred dollars on it myself."

"Yes, sir. I know."

The hand gave his shoulder a friendly slap. "Well, there's talk of pitting Dr. Paulson's stable boy, Shadrach, against our Lida's Wade. Why don't you go take care of old Harpe, there. Want me to put down a little money for you?"

"No, sir. Guess not."

"Well, you go on now, and hurry on back."

"Yes, sir."

As he left the barn, he looked toward Leila, expecting to see some glint of triumph in her eyes, some hint of a sneer on her face. But there was nothing. She was not even looking at him, and her face was blank, as if she were totally indifferent.

When he stepped out into the darkness of the service lane, tears gathered in his eyes, and he could not hold

back a sob. A year of training the bird gone. Three wins, but never another. Why the hell was it, he wondered, that sooner or later he always had to lose?

It seemed to him it had been that way all of his life: every good thing at last came to an end. One of his best jobs had been with a New Orleans slaver, and he had lost it when he maimed a girl. Later he had had a good job in a warehouse, but after killing a drunk in a brothel, he had had to flee from New Orleans. Now, after a long series of jobs, he had the best one of his life, and he was in danger of losing it.

Aaron Sabre had been quite blunt. "There are two things to which I strenuously object, Mr. Turnage. They are unnecessary brutality and the abuse of women. On the second matter, I am quite aware that many overseers consider all black women their prerogative, but that is not the case at Sabrehill. Now, if you expect us to renew your contract . . ."

Turnage had thought that Leila might have complained against him, but he could not be certain until Joel Sabre had come to him. "Now, we're both men of the world," he had said, embarrassed, "but my niece, Miss Amity, she don't understand some things . . ."

Miss Amity. That meant that Leila had complained to her mistress about him, about a *white* man, as if he were some jigaboo field hand, and Miss Amity in turn had gone to her uncle. And now his job was in jeopardy.

Because of Jeb, really. Jeb, who had Leila's eye. It seemed to him that his luck had changed the day Jeb went to work and every black bitch in the fields dropped her hoe and turned to look at him.

Well, he and Cheney had some plans for Jeb, and tonight was the perfect time.

He carried Big Harpe along the dark service lane to his house. He took off the metal gaffs and threw the bird behind the house, planning to bury it somewhere in the fields the next day.

When he arrived back at the barn, no new sporting event had yet been arranged. Jugs were being passed,

and some of the guests were observing a huge old cottonmouth, kept as a pet in a large wicker basket. Turnage managed to get Joel Sabre outside the door.

"The money we lost on Harpe, Mr. Joel," he said. "I know a way we just might get it back."

"Well, now, I'd be interested in that."

Turnage lowered his voice. "The new houseboy. Jebediah. Pit him against Cheney."

Joel Sabre looked confused, as if he didn't quite see the point in this. Everybody knew Cheney was a great fighter, but . . .

"They've been talking about how big Jeb is," Turnage explained patiently. "I tell 'em, sure, and he's the strongest nigger I know, but still Cheney's got experience even if he is getting old and slow. And they say, no, Cheney's day is about over. But Cheney knows Jeb and figures he can beat him easy."

"You think Cheney is a sure winner?"

"No, I wouldn't say that," Turnage said judiciously. Joel Sabre would not allow the match unless he thought it reasonably even. "I'd say Jeb has a chance, but I'd put my money on Cheney every time."

"Guess I would too. But what makes you think Jeb will fight? I'd never try to make a nigger fight against his will."

"Oh, I think he'll fight. Cheney says Jeb swore he'd kill him if he ever touched him with a whip again. Then Cheney put him to the post. And Cheney'd like to pay Jeb back for that threat." Even if Jeb refused to fight, even if he backed down before Leila, that would serve Turnage's purpose as well.

"A grudge fight!" Joel Sabre said, smiling.

"That's right. The best kind."

The smile faded. "But Aaron might not like it. Jeb's a house servant."

"But he's been in the fields for years. He's hard!"

"I'll have to think about it."

Think all you please, damn you, Turnage swore silently, *but get that nigger out here.*

The waltz was a mistake. The long sweeps, the dizzying whirls, the closeness only increased the headiness and the

trembling. Her lips felt full and her breasts heavy, and she didn't think she could stand it much longer. She had to get away from him.

"Dulcy!"

He followed after her. She was a hypocrite, and she knew it: she wanted him to follow. She did not go to the north parlor or out onto the piazza where guests had gathered. She went through the south parlor and the central passage and out the north door. Looking west between the kitchen and the mansion, she saw two couples, so she turned east. She crossed the east portico and hurried toward the garden. *I've got to be alone*, she thought desperately, *I've got to be alone!* . . . knowing all the time that he followed.

From the house, faintly, came the sound of another waltz. The only nearby light came from the ballroom window, and she fled from it. Light came from the barn at the far end of the paddock, but it was distant. She hurried into the darkness of the east garden, thinking, *Amity is right! I'm an animal, a bitch! I've no right to feel this way, not about him!*

The east garden was laid out in a maze of hedges of varying heights, with a gazebo toward the far end. Here and there benches were set, and she almost tripped over one. She caught a glimpse of a young couple slipping behind a higher hedge, but she paid no attention to them.

"Dulcy!"

Why did he have to call her name, even in a whisper? And why wasn't she leading him toward Amity instead of away from her? Why couldn't she do as Lucy had told her?

She entered the vine-covered gazebo. Here it was even darker than the night, and the waltz was more distant.

"Dulcy, why did you run away like that?" Quentin entered the gazebo, a shadow.

"I was tired of dancing."

"Yes . . . so was I."

She waited for what must happen, and it did. The shadow came closer. Hands took her upper arms. She felt Quentin's warm breath as he brought his face to hers. But

at the last instant she turned her face away, and his lips burned her cheek.

"No, Quentin," she whispered.

"But you led me out here."

"No, I did not." She wanted to believe it, but she knew she was lying.

"Known you all your life," Quentin murmured. "Remember you when you was a baby. Remember when I fished you out of the river. Yet these last weeks you been home, not once have you given me a hello kiss like a little sister would." Something made him laugh, some memory. "Not once like a little sister."

"But I'm not—"

"Please, Dulcy."

So she turned her mouth to him, knowing she shouldn't. His lips moved hers, their bodies met, and the hot tide of feeling was unbearable. She wrenched away from him.

"Go away, Quentin. Go away!"

He sounded pained. "Now, you know you wanted me to come out here—"

"I know, and I was wrong."

There was silence in the gazebo. Laughter in the distance. And then a new waltz. She despised herself.

"Dulcy, there's something I've got to tell you." Ever so slightly, Quentin's voice was shaking. "We been a long time apart, and I never expected the way you grown up. I mean, Dulcy, honey, it's *you* I want to come calling on."

"But you can't!" She knew now that Lucy was right. What Quentin was suggesting was unthinkable.

"Why can't I, Dulcy? Why can't—"

"Because you're Amity's beau. You've been calling on her all this time, all these years—"

"That's not true!" Quentin sounded pained. "You talk like she's the only young lady I call on, but I call on them *all*. And don't others call on Amity too? I don't know how anybody gets the idea I *belong* to that sister of yours, but I don't!"

"But you go places with her, you take her riding without a chaperone—"

"Dulcy, I just don't care! I like Amity. We've had a lot of good times together. I've had good times with other

gals I wouldn't want to tell you about. But I just don't feel about her, or them, the way I feel about you right now. And I reckon I never will."

Dulcy felt sick—sick with desire, sick with the trouble she was causing.

"It's you I want to see," Quentin said after a moment. "You and not Amity. It's you I want to be alone with, the way we are now. I want to be *your* beau, Dulcy."

The situation was impossible. "You can't be, Quentin. You just can't be. I don't care how you see it, I know how my sister sees it. And you can't be my beau, not ever."

Again, there was silence. There was no laughter in the air now, no music.

"Listen," Quentin said, "I don't want to hurt your sister, any more than you do. But what if I was to stay away from her for a while? What if I was to stay away for a long time?"

"You're not going to do that. You're going to go right on seeing Amity."

"I can't. Not with people getting crazy ideas about her and me. Now, how about you and me?"

"No. I couldn't do that to my sister. Not ever." Hoping, even as she said it, that some day he would make her break her vow.

"All right," Quentin said. "Then I reckon the sacred groves and glens of Sabrehill ain't gonna see much of me after this. I got me my hello kiss, and now it's time to kiss goodbye."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

She let it happen, knowing that one kiss would lead to another. His arms slid under hers. Lips met and opened to share liquid fire in the dark. The fire flowed through her, flowed to her breasts and her spreading thighs, and she melted against him even as he hardened against her. His arms locked around her, his fingers traveling the full curve of her spine. Tongues probed, and she found herself grinding her breasts against his chest, twisting her hips against him. Then she was entirely lost. Mindless, reeling, she was pressing rhythmically against him, seeking some ultimate . . .

"Oh, Christ," Quentin said, choking, "I can't lose you. Dulcy, I have got to have you."

Her knees gave way. She slid from his arms and fell weeping to the floor of the gazebo.

Amity walked slowly away from the gazebo. There was no longer any reason to stand by it, no reason to listen. She had found Quentin.

There was no pain. She felt stunned, numb, bloodless, a wraith in the dark. It was as if for the moment she had ceased to exist, along with all her plans, all her dreams. Dulcy had done it again, after all these years. Little Dulcy, with her luminous dark eyes and her pretended innocence. Little Dulcy, the thief of affections, the thief of her future.

No, there could be no Quentin in her future now. And no Kimbrough Hall. And no Kimbrough House in Charleston. That was all gone, as if the dream had never been, blown to dust, as dead as forgiveness. It was not that she had any illusions about men—she knew they were animals, ready to fall into any available female's bed, and she had heard stories about Quentin. You understood that sort of thing and overlooked it. But not where Dulcy was concerned. Not the sister who had always stolen from you. That was beyond forgiveness.

She wandered about the garden like a sleepwalker, hardly thinking, not knowing where she was heading. She wondered vaguely what people would think when she and Quentin were no longer seen together. She wondered what would happen to Dulcy and Quentin, and she at last felt a small dart of pain.

"Amity, honey, you should have come out earlier." It was her Uncle Joel. He put an arm around her shoulders. "Not that your papa approves of your seeing cockfights, but you would have brought us luck."

She found she was by the barn. Mr. Turnage stood nearby, and inside, in the light, men were drinking and laughing. There was a bright spray of blood on Joel Sabre's shirtfront.

"Well, if you all needed little me," she answered brightly, "I sure am sorry I wasn't here."

Uncle Joel gave her shoulders a squeeze. "You know, we was just thinking, what if we was to get Jebediah down here to fight with Cheney, then put our money on Cheney—"

"Why, I think that's a wonderful idea," Amity said, staring at the blood, "but take your little girl's advice, Uncle Joel, and put your money on Jeb."

Uncle Joel looked confused.

Without thinking, Amity reached out and touched the blood on his shirt. She heard the cottonmouth rustle in its basket. It occurred to her that Dulcy owed her now. And Dulcy was going to pay. Once and for all. Dulcy was going to pay.

The shadow fell across the book in his hand, and he knew he had been caught. After all the waiting, he had been caught during his very first time alone in the library.

He looked around, looked into the large, very blue, searching eyes. Miss Lucy wore a faint smile—triumphant?—which he longed to wipe off of her face. How long had she been watching? Had she seen him open any of the drawers? He had opened only a few when it occurred to him that any maps would quite likely be locked up in the office. Perhaps the chance he was taking was for nothing. Then, seized by a sudden hunger for words, he had pulled this volume down and turned the familiar pages.

He started to close the book, but her hand came to rest on it.

"We've missed you, Jebediah," she said.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. I brought some drinks in here. Then I started to clean up—"

"And got lost between the pages of a book. It's all right. Except that this is hardly the right time. What have you been reading?"

"Nothing, ma'am. I just grabbed a book from the shelf—"

"Just any book, Jebediah? It didn't look that way to me."

Yes, she had seen him, watched him, spied on him. Smiled at him behind his back. Nigger in the white folks'

library. Staring at duh books wid all dem big white folks' words.

She gently took the book from his hand and looked at the cover. "As I thought. *The Merchant of Venice*. Would you like to read this, Jebediah?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked at the page to which he had turned and smiled with pleased recognition. "Oh, yes. . . . 'I am a Jew,' " she read. " 'Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is?' I very much believe that, Jebediah."

The pressure was building. He could not stop it. He said, "And what about the rest of it, ma'am?"

"What?"

" 'If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?' "

He had spoken sweetly, gently, respectfully, but he had gone too far. He had spoken the terrifying forbidden word: *revenge*! Miss Lucy's face was a blank, and his own jaws began to ache.

"You've read it before," she said.

"Yes, ma'am."

"What else have you read?"

"I was well acquainted with the Pinkham library, ma'am."

Miss Lucy's mouth became faintly pinched, her eyes harder. "Jebediah, I knew you were intelligent and somewhat tutored, yet I badly underestimated you. But you led me to do so, and I don't think your resentment is quite fair."

She was right, of course, and that only heightened his bitterness. "Do I seem resentful, ma'am? I certainly don't mean—"

"Don't make the same mistake with me that I made with you. I can read your eyes and that clenching jaw as well as your voice. Yes, if we wrong you, you shall re-

venge. I, for one, think that day may come. But I have not made myself your enemy."

Then who? he wanted to ask. *You own me; if not you, then who?* But somehow he managed to keep silent. He had already said enough.

They were staring hard-eyed at each other when a stable boy came to the door. "Mr. Joel, he sent me. Say he want to see Jebediah at once."

Miss Lucy's eyes didn't waver. "You'd better go," she said.

He was a fool, he thought angrily as he followed the east service lane toward the lighted door of the barn. The woman had taken him out of the fields and given him a chance to survive, and she had had no idea of what he had been after in the library. If he had handled the situation correctly, it might even have helped him. But with a few words from Shakespeare and a look in his eyes, he had managed to make her an enemy. Why would she want him in the house now, a slave who had shown his true feelings toward her? More likely than not, he could expect to find himself back in the fields—and under Cheney's whip—in the morning.

He wondered uneasily what Mr. Joel could want with him in the barn. Working almost exclusively under Miss Lucy's direction, he had had very little contact with Mr. Joel.

When he arrived at the barn, he found that the cock-fight ring had been taken down and put away, but most of the male guests of the evening were still congregated there, together with the servants who had driven them to Sabrehill. A number of Sabrehill blacks were also there, including Cheney, who stood to one side, shirtless, flexing his muscles. The only women present were Miss Amity and Leila. Jeb was conscious of all eyes turning to him as he entered the barn and went to Mr. Joel and Mr. Turnage.

"Jeb, we have a little favor we want from you." Joel Sabre spoke in a low, confidential voice.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Joel?"

"Understand you have a grudge against Cheney for that whipping he gave you a while back. Is that so?"

Jeb said nothing. He stared at the blood on Joel Sabre's shirt.

Turnage said, "Answer, nigger." Jeb didn't like the way he was smiling.

"I have no grudge, Mr. Joel, sir."

"But still, you'd like to get a little off your chest, wouldn't you?" Joel asked. "Now, understand, nobody is gonna make you fight him, but you'd be doing us a favor, and I'd be beholden. I'd make it up to you—"

"I don't fight, Mr. Joel, sir." So that was what they wanted: to pit him like an animal against another slave. Like cock against cock and dog against dog. He wasn't surprised; it had happened to him before. But it was not going to happen tonight.

Joel Sabre looked disappointed. "Well, now, Mr. Turnage says you put up a terrific fight when he caught you."

"I don't fight, sir. I'm just a houseboy, sir, not a fighter."

"We don't allow no butting, biting, or gouging, you know. No kicking and no low blows—"

"Some people here already put up their money," Turnage drawled. "Shame to disappoint them."

"Sure would be. Jeb, you wouldn't want to disappoint them would you?"

There was only one thing to do: get out of the barn as quickly as possible. Rage piled on rage as he thought of Miss Lucy's pinched white face in the library. And now this.

"Mr. Joel, you have said that no one would make me fight. I don't fight, sir. I am not a fighter."

A hand fell on his shoulder. It closed like a vise, and he found himself hurled toward the center of the barn. He nearly lost his footing and went down, and he found himself facing a grinning Cheney.

"Hey, Jeb, you owe me. You say by God you gon' kill me. You gon' kill me, Jeb?"

Space instantly cleared around the two men. This was what the crowd wanted: action. Jeb looked at Joel Sabre, caught his eyes and held them. Was he going to stop this or not?

"Now, gentlemen, we can't force Jeb—"

"Don't have to force Jeb," Cheney said. He gave Jeb a couple of rapid pats on the cheek. "Old Jeb, he just dying to kill Cheney. Just got to stir him up some."

The barn door was open. Joel Sabre, he was sure, was not going to have him whipped for walking through that door. He turned toward it. He walked.

Cheney blocked his way. The older slave was like a rock, yet fast on his feet, fast with his hands. He caught Jeb on each side of the chest and threw him back into the hands of two other slaves as easily as he might have tossed a ball.

"Stir him up some," Cheney urged the others. "Old Jeb, he want to fight."

The others laughed. Jeb was easy game now, big but harmless. He found himself, not hurt, but tossed from one pair of hands to another, while Joel Sabre made ineffectual sounds about Jeb not being made to fight. The lights of the barn and the figures around him became a blur.

He would not fight. With a cry of anger, he thrust the other slaves away.

The barn was suddenly very quiet. The door was still open, and Jeb walked toward it.

It should have ended there. But Cheney danced lightly in front of Jeb, feigned a few blows, then brought a foot up between Jeb's legs. Jeb sidestepped and caught it on a thigh.

And the rage boiled over.

But he did not attack Cheney. If forced to fight, he would fight his way, not theirs.

Raising his right fist, he turned to the slave on his left and threw it with all his strength into the surprised man's face, feeling the face smash in satisfactorily, the nose go, the teeth come loose. Before the man had hit the floor, the arm was pulling down and back to catch the slave on the right in the ribs, ribs that strained, cracked, gave way. Then the arm was coming up again, and Jeb was pivoting left, throwing his left fist at the man behind him, following up with his right.

He had not wanted to fight. He had not wanted to be forced, to be used like an animal. And yet in a way this

was highly satisfactory. All the hidden angers, all the frustrations, all the humiliation and pain could be released now. *They* had asked for this, *they* had brought him to this point, and now he had the joy of striking out, of smashing, of tearing down. A half a dozen or more slaves had declared themselves against him, and any who got near him, any he could reach, he was striking down with all the power he could put behind his fists.

He was murderous.

The challenge now was simply to bring him down: any or all of them. He put them aside, threw them away, beat them down, and Cheney was suddenly looming up before him. If Cheney hit him, he didn't feel it. When he struck the driver over the heart, it was like beating his fists against rock, yet Cheney's eyes went glassy with pain or hatred. Jeb smashed the face and watched the hatred turn to amazement. He smashed on, body, face, body, face, and the eyes turned dull. Cheney fell away, and then Jeb had to turn to face the others again.

They were no problem. He merely seized a couple of them and smashed their skulls together, then discarded them. He held another up with one fist while beating him senseless with the other, then threw him at a fourth. Then turned to meet Cheney again.

It was good. He would not have wanted the driver to go down too easily. He wanted to take the time to make blood run freely from the nose and the mouth. He wanted to work surgically on the eyes so that for at least a day or two Cheney would be blind. He wanted to give each blow that vicious little twist that crushed and broke the skin.

Cheney would not fall, refused to fall, and Jeb was glad. It prolonged the butchering—body, face, body, face—as he drove Cheney back against a wall. He slacked off his blows, afraid that Cheney would go down too soon, for the man was now hardly trying to fight back. He bent forward, his arms around his head for protection, and Jeb used a hard knee to straighten him up. Jeb didn't care if Cheney never went down.

But he did go down. Jeb began to feel as if he were beating a pillow, something that yielded without resis-

tance to each punch. He saw the knees begin to bend ever so slightly—and suddenly they went, and Cheney was down on them, swaying from side to side. He was finished, but Jeb was not. He kicked Cheney once solidly in the guts, then jammed his boot heel into the bloody face, and the driver toppled over and lay still.

“God almighty,” Joel Sabre said.

And then Mr. Turnage came at Jeb with the ax handle. His eyes were mad; they held the same insanity that Jeb’s had had. They were the eyes of a man who had lost too much too often and now demanded payment—*had* to have payment. A kind of wail, a keening sound, came from between his stretched lips. The ax handle held high and far back, he ran at Jeb and swung with all his strength.

Jeb caught Turnage’s wrist with one hand, and the ax handle fell to the floor. He caught Turnage’s shirt front with the other hand and whirled him around until his back was to a post. Never before had he handled a white man in such a way. He slammed Turnage back against the post with all his strength, and the man’s head struck wood with a sickening thump. He sank to one knee, as if genuflecting. Jeb picked up the ax handle, and it occurred to him how easily he could brain Turnage with it. But he didn’t. He snapped the handle like a reed against the post and flung the pieces at the overseer’s lap.

He walked out of the barn.

His entire body seemed to be shaking, and he thought he was going to be sick. He went to a nearby pump, the same one he had visited when he had been brought back to Sabrehill, and once again he threw buckets of water over his head.

He walked across the courtyard to his cottage. He was through for the evening. After what had happened they would not expect to see him again. Miss Lucy might wonder what had happened to him, but to hell with her.

He felt his way to the bedroom. When he lighted the lamp, Leila was standing there, naked.

Somehow he wasn’t at all surprised. She was beautiful,

as he had known she would be, beautiful in her soft fullness and valleys and deep shadows. Yet he wasn't shocked or excited, just dimly, distantly grateful.

She didn't smile. She looked concerned, as a friend might. "You all right now, Jebediah?" she asked. "They don't hurt you too bad?"

Leaning forward against the table, he nodded to the first question, shook his head to the second. He was still afraid he might be sick.

"Let me help you."

She was gentle. She helped him slip out of his torn blood-stained shirt. She knelt to take off his shoes, then unfastened his pants and helped him to step out of them. And still he felt no desire.

"Want some whiskey?"

"No. Make me sick."

He began to feel better as she washed the remaining blood away and held a cool wet cloth to his throat.

While he was climbing behind the new mosquito netting and onto the bed, she went to draw in the latch string. She returned and climbed into bed with him, leaving the lamp burning. She leaned over him, her breasts heavy against him, and kissed him gently. "And now, Jebediah," she said.

And desire came at last.

He lost himself in it. Forgot the Sabres and the Turnages and the Cheneys. Forgot the years of the whip, the betrayals, the degradations. Knew nothing but the taste of nipple and thigh, the delicate caress, the fiery kiss. Forgot all else.

Until the moment when he found himself poised above her, staring into the shadows between their two naked bodies. He had promised himself: no friends; no lovers, no tenderness, nothing that might bind him. Until he was free.

But it was too late now. She rose to meet him, drew him to her, and whispered a sweet command. He obeyed, all the promises forgotten.

Turnage felt sick. He wanted to sob aloud. There was a woman in his bed, a girl from the quarters, but he didn't

care. She wasn't the one he wanted, the one he had to have.

Seated by his front window, he watched, sipping whiskey. He stiffened as at last the dim light, hardly perceptible, in the butler's cottage went out. Every other light had long been out. The guests had departed, and Sabrehill slept—except for Turnage and whoever might be with Jeb in the cottage across the courtyard. Turnage had not been able to see into the cottage, had not been able to hear, but he had seen Leila enter it much earlier, and if she were still there. . . .

The door of the cottage opened. A small figure stepped out moving hesitantly, as if fearful of being observed. It was a girl. After a few seconds, she went hastily, almost running, across the courtyard toward the big house. Even in the dark, Turnage recognized Leila.

He smashed his empty cup against the floor.

He hadn't been bothered much by Jebediah Hayes at first. Jeb was a big nigger with a fancy way of talking and a way with wenches, but that was all, and he made a good whipping boy. Turnage had figured on whipping him into shape. A good overseer by his own lights, he enjoyed breaking big snotty niggers and bringing them to their knees before their women. Show a nigger he was nothing, and you would never have trouble from him, never need fear him.

But everything had gone wrong. Jeb had escaped Turnage's whip to the big house. Forced to fight, he had destroyed Cheney and every other black who got near him. He had even handled Turnage like a mere doll, *raised his hand against a white man*, and gone unpunished. And now he had taken Turnage's woman, the one black girl at Sabrehill he felt he had to have.

Turnage even felt that in some obscure way the loss of Big Harpe was Jeb's fault.

I got to get him, he thought. *Mr. Aaron may run me off or he may not, but before I go, I got to get him. He don't know it yet, but he's a dead nigger.*

He went into the bedroom and told the wench to get her ass back to the quarters.

Six

Leila knew where a key was hidden, but she didn't need it. Unlike most of their neighbors, the Sabres were careless, or perhaps too trusting, and the north door was unlocked. Leila closed it behind her and went carefully, silently, up the steps.

There was a thin line of light at the bottom edge of Amity's door.

Leila hesitated. She had seen no light in the window from outside. That meant Amity had been watching at the window and had seen her coming. Jeb had suggested that she leave now rather than be seen leaving at dawn by Mr. Turnage, and she had agreed that Mr. Turnage was already enough trouble without asking for more. But now she wished she had stayed with Jeb. She was in no mood for Amity's questions.

But Amity was waiting.

She was sitting up on her bed, her legs crossed under her, when Leila entered the room. Only one lamp was burning, and that on the far side of the netting. Amity's

blond hair hung down, shadowing her face, but Leila could see that the eyes were hard.

Something was wrong. Leila had no idea of what it could be, but she knew her mistress, and the scent of trouble was heavy in the air. It frightened her. She managed a weak smile and moved toward her own small bed and the cabinet where her nightgown hung.

"You were with him a long time." The voice was low, hard, faintly accusing.

Leila groped for the right answer. "I'm sorry. I sure didn't mean to keep you awake."

"You didn't. I'll bet you stink of him, don't you?"

"No . . . no, I don't stink of nobody." Leila's face burned.

"If I say you stink, you stink." Amity's sullen gaze clung to Leila. "Did you do it with him?"

Pulling her dress over her head, Leila pretended not to hear.

"I said, did you do it—"

"Do what?"

"You know perfectly well what. Did . . . you . . . do it?"

"Yes."

The voice dropped still lower, but it was as cold and hard as ever. "Tell me about it."

Out of her limited but intensive experience Leila had told Amity in considerable detail how love was made and what it was like, but she had no intention of repeating herself tonight. She grabbed at her nightgown, for once ashamed of her nakedness.

"Well, answer me. Did you like it?"

"What difference do it make? I did what you wanted me to do, ain't that enough?"

"No, it ain't. I want to know."

"Yes, I liked it," Leila said defiantly. "It was the very best ever!"

"You lower your voice."

"It was the very best I ever had, and if he coulda kept on, I'd be with him yet!"

"I'll bet you would. You really are an animal, aren't you?"

Tears rushed to Leila's eyes and abruptly she became ten years younger. "Amity Sabre, what call you got to talk to me like that?"

"Shut up, you animal, and go to bed. You're all animals, the whole lot of you. You and Jebediah and Dulcy and Quentin—"

"It was your idea I go to him. *I* don't have to marry him. *I ain't gonna* marry him—"

"I said shut up!" Amity leaned toward Leila, and her voice shook with strain. "Now, you listen to me. When I tell you you're gonna do something, don't you ever again tell me you ain't. And *I* say you're gonna go on bedding with that nigger, you and you only, and you're gonna marry him. Purely because I say so! Do you understand me?"

"Yes'm."

"Because you're mine, and you'll damned well do as I say!"

Leila stood paralyzed, afraid to move, afraid to speak. Afraid of the cold hard eyes. She knew Amity in this mood to be capable of anything.

"Go to bed." Amity leaned back, turned away.

Leila began to breathe again. The crisis, whatever had caused it, seemed to be over. And since she had to survive, whatever the insults and indignities, a peace offering, a gesture, was in order.

"You want me to get in bed with you?" she asked.

"No."

"Let me give you a nice rub—soothe you and help you sleep."

"I said no. I don't want to smell his stink on you. Either shut up and go to bed or go sleep somewhere else."

Leila climbed into her bed. For a time Amity continued to sit on her own bed, unmoving, as if she were made of stone. Then at last she put out the light.

Leila turned to the wall and tried not to weep.

For years he had awakened each morning long before dawn. He had awakened abruptly and frightened, braced for the first bite of the whip. In rage, half naked, he had

raced with others to a trough where he might, if there were time, splash water on his face. Then he had raced to a kitchen where boiled meal was given to him on a shingle, and he had eaten it with his fingers or a spoon of his own fashioning. The diet had been sufficient to keep him healthy, but he had had to fight it down without tasting it, always on the verge of gagging it up.

The only respite had been on Sundays, and even then he had often been awakened early to do special chores: to repair cabins, work in a kitchen garden, dig an irrigation ditch. Even love, such as there was, had to be taken on the run and was subject to the master's or overseer's whim.

The old habit stayed with him. Suddenly he was awake, though it was Sunday and not yet light. But there was a difference. After the first heart-lurching thrust of fear, he felt safe. Safe and comfortable in his own bed in his own small cottage. Amazing how quickly fear died.

Then, sickeningly, he remembered that he was not safe at all. Last night had been a disaster. First he had quarreled with Miss Lucy, a mistake so foolish that he deserved to be whipped for it. Then he had allowed himself to be pushed into a fight which had ended with his manhandling the overseer. And finally he had fallen into bed with Leila, just as Miss Amity wished him to do—with Leila, who was supposed to settle him down and make him Miss Amity's servant.

There was not much he could do about Turnage. The two of them had been natural enemies from the start, and the situation was now far worse. Turnage would no doubt be intent on punishing Jeb, even killing him, if he ever got the chance. But there was one hopeful note: Jeb had clearly been pushed into the fight last night and had merely defended himself, and Joel Sabre had, without a word, allowed him to walk out of the barn. And Jeb had not been disturbed thereafter, while with Leila.

He could do somewhat more about Miss Lucy, and he had best do it quickly. If she put him out of the big house, he had little chance of surviving Turnage. Turnage would do exactly as he had promised, and the life of the whip would begin again, until Jeb found himself better

off dead. But again there was a hopeful note. For all her faintly patronizing air, Miss Lucy was not a complete fool, and she liked to think of herself as friend and protector of "her people." It should be possible, then, to make amends with her. And Jeb determined again that he would mask his pride and *Yas, massa* the bastards to death if he had to, as long as he could believe that his day was coming.

And then there was Leila.

Yes, that was the real trap. Leila had been kind to him last night—kind and exciting and loving beyond anything he had experienced with a woman in four years. The few desperate couplings of those years had been forgotten in the hours of last night, the torture forgotten, the losses forgotten. And Jeb was grateful, and that was the danger. He had seen it often: the slave who could not run because he could not desert a parent, a sweetheart, a child. He had been that slave himself.

When you ran, you ran alone. You had little enough chance even then. Therefore, it was best to hold yourself aloof: no family, no close friends, no lover. Leila had said she would not hold him here at Sabrehill, but that in itself guaranteed nothing. They had become lovers, at least for the night, and he must not allow himself to become tied to her. He must not become hers and hers alone.

Well, he could do something about that.

Thinking over the possibilities, he got out of bed. He pulled on a pair of pants but did not bother with shirt or shoes. As he went quietly out his front door, he saw no sign that Mr. Turnage might be watching. Dawn was breaking, and the summer air was already quite warm.

He considered the possibilities further and selected the most likely one. He turned down the west service lane toward the big-house quarters.

The quarters, a long brick building with several rooms, lay at the end of the lane. Most of the windows were open, and Jeb went quietly around the building looking in each until he found the room he wanted. It served as a dormitory for several women, and just inside the window, lying face down on her narrow bed, was a naked girl.

Her name was Vidette, she was plumply pretty, and she "helped out" in the kitchen. Jeb had known where to find her, because she had told him. She made no secret of having several lovers who were as popular as she: it was a matter of status. This, too, suited Jeb's requirements. It meant no ties.

By leaning through the window and stretching, he could just touch her back. The second time he touched her, she gasped and flipped over to stare at him, hurriedly yanking a ragged blanket over herself. Then she recognized him and smiled. Rising up on her knees, she moved to the window, ineffectually holding the blanket before herself.

"What you doing here so early?" she whispered.

He reached through the window, put his arm around her, and stroked the bare small of her back. "Thought I'd take an early swim," he whispered into her ear. "There's plenty of time before work. How about coming along?"

"Well . . ." She moved her head against his lips. "I don't know."

"It's nice at this hour. Just you and me, all alone there. Doing anything we please."

Her eyes widened. "Well . . . wait'll I get me a shift on."

"What for, honey child? You know you're not going to wear it."

After Vidette, there would be others. Leila would not be his woman. He would not be her man.

She's gonna pay.

The stunned feeling was gone when Amity opened her eyes to the early morning light. Nothing was forgotten, nothing had to be recalled. It was all there in her mind, together with the determination: *Dulcy must pay.*

But how?

Seldom did she awaken so early, but from the moment she opened her eyes, her mind raced. Quentin Kimbrough and Kimbrough Hall were lost. She would never take Quentin back, even if she could have him. That left a free path for Dulcy, once a respectable length of

time had passed. But if she herself could not, or would not, have Quentin, Dulcy damn well was not going to have him either. She would have to find a way to stop that.

Furthermore, she had to find a way to repair her own prospects. She was no longer a child, she was twenty years old and had discouraged many a beau in favor of Quentin. She had no intention now of settling for something less than Kimbrough Hall if she could possibly help it. She had to find some worthy substitute, something even better than Kimbrough Hall.

But again, how?

She got out of bed. She stared at the sleeping Leila for a moment, thinking, *Animals, all of them*. Then, looking out the window, she saw her Uncle Joel walking toward the office. If Dulcy was going to be made to pay, there was a great deal Amity had to learn. Hastily, she tossed tepid water on her face. She pulled a robe over her nightgown, stepped into slippers, and hurried down the stairs and out to the office.

She hugged her uncle, kissed him, told him how much she loved Sabrehill in the quiet of early Sunday morning. She said she could hardly bear the thought that she might one day leave it.

"Well, I'm sure you'll find Kimbrough Hall quite a consolation. Mighty fine plantation, the Kimbrough place."

Amity widened her eyes. "Now, what gives you the idea I'm going to live at Kimbrough Hall?"

"Why, you and Quentin—"

"Oh, Uncle Joel," she laughed. "Quentin is just *one* of my beaux. I like Quentin, but I don't know as I could stand him for a lifetime. He's not at all like you, you know."

Joel Sabre looked bewildered. "But all of us been thinking all this time—"

"Uncle Joel, now you listen to me. If I was to marry Quentin Kimbrough and we was to have a boy child, would that boy ever become master of Sabrehill?"

"Wouldn't be no need. I told you all about this, Amity. Wouldn't be no need, unless Lucy and Dulcy had no sons. Then your boy would get Sabrehill, but otherwise he'd

have Kimbrough. You all would have all the security you needed at Kimbrough."

That was as Amity had thought. She was reviewing her memory of her uncle's and father's rather complex wills. If Dulcy were to marry Quentin, she would be safely out of the way, but that was not the way in which Amity wished to be rid of her.

"You see," she said, "if I was to marry Quentin, I'd have to leave Sabrehill. And the idea makes me just desolate. Wouldn't it be much better if I married someone like—oh, like one of the younger Harmon boys?"

Joel nodded slowly, seeing her point. The Harmons did not want their holding broken up any more than the Sabres did. The eldest son would receive the major inheritance. The younger sons would be expected to seek their fortunes elsewhere. If Amity were to marry a younger Harmon, he might well move to Sabrehill and help run it, and his son might one day become Sabrehill's master.

"That would be mighty nice," Joel said. "Never did like the idea of you leaving Sabrehill. And those Harmon boys ain't too bad. Didn't know you were interested in any of them boys."

"Oh, I'm just talking, Uncle Joel, just talking. But it has occurred to me that if Dulcy was to marry someone like—well, like Quentin—"

"Dulcy marry Quentin?" Joel was surprised.

"Well, someone like that. And if Lucy was to marry someone like Paul Devereau, that would leave just me here at Sabrehill."

Joel shook his head. "No. Reckon if you married a Harmon and Lucy married Paul, you might both wind up living here—if the Harmon boy didn't find something better."

"But why? I don't understand."

"Honey child, I don't know if you ever heard, but old Benjamin Devereau had business problems. We mortgaged a lot of Devereau land, and it don't look like we're gonna be paid back for a long time. Now, if Lucy and Paul got married, that could kinda be overlooked. Sabrehill and the Devereau property would become one big plantation."

"And Paul Devereau would eventually become its master," Amity said slowly, "and not my Harmon boy."

"Well, Paul's a good planter as well as a good lawyer. And there's family connections, you know—he's a third or fourth cousin to your momma, you know."

"And our lawyer-cousin would no doubt make quite sure that *his* son—and Lucy's—would one day take over Sabrehill."

"I reckon, but you know you'll always have a home here if you need it. That's in our wills, your papa's and mine both."

She knew, but a mere home at Sabrehill was not what she wanted. She had been toying with the idea of making Sabrehill her own. That would be possible if she were willing to let Dulcy marry Quentin—which she was not—and if Lucy either remained single or married and moved away.

Could she, Amity wondered, take Paul Devereau away from Lucy? It seemed likely. She was younger and more adept at charm. She would simply become less the country belle that Quentin liked and more the Charleston lady that Paul Devereau would prefer. She would drop her uncle's "ain'ts" and "caints" and talk more like Lucy and her father—more like Paul himself. Become more delicate, more sensitive. Carry slim volumes of poetry. She could do it.

But she still would not have Sabrehill. Her father would not allow it. Lucy's happiness meant too much to him. If he even dimly suspected Amity of interfering with Lucy's tenuous romance, he would become murderous. The worst thing Amity could do would be to interfere between Lucy and Paul Devereau.

It occurred to Amity that her father would become just as murderous with his beloved Dulcy if he knew what she had been up to with Quentin. She thought of telling him about it, but quickly dismissed the possibility: it would be too humiliating. And now she had declared to her uncle that she had no real interest in Quentin, which gave Dulcy a free hand.

Her father stood in her way. Dulcy had got in her way. Lucy and Paul Devereau were in her way. It seemed

to her that the whole world was conspiring against her, but she would beat them all yet. Somehow she would find an answer.

Breakfast was later on Sunday morning. It was completely informal, and the trick was to anticipate where coffee or tea would be wanted: at the table, in a bedroom, out in the office. The Sabre ladies bustled up and down the stairs, Miss Amity yelling at Leila, Miss Lucy quietly marshalling a small troop of maids, Miss Dulcy silent. Jeb had the knack of appearing unobtrusively wherever he might be needed. The house settled down after Mr. Joel and the ladies had headed for church in the village of Riverboro, and Mr. Aaron, a poor churchgoer, asked for his coffee.

There was peace then for a little while, a time to laze in the sun on the kitchen steps, a time to sit and chat in the kitchen. Fresh coffee was made, and preparations for dinner were started in a leisurely way. When the churchgoers at last returned, a second breakfast of coffee and biscuits was placed on the table. Jeb served, watching for any signs of disfavor from Miss Lucy. He saw none; she looked through him.

He finally got her alone on the portico to the kitchen. "Miss Lucy . . ."

No answer; merely a faintly questioning look.

He braced himself, made himself say the words. "Miss Lucy, would it be permitted . . . for me to express . . . regret . . . for my rather . . . sullen mood last evening?"

Miss Lucy's eyes widened with surprise. Then her lips pinched slightly and one eyebrow lifted. She might have been suppressing a smile. "Oh, my," she said. "We are so formal."

Jeb's face warmed. The speech had been forced and asinine but the best he could do. He said, "A mode of respect, ma'am. Nothing more."

She nodded. She knew, of course, why he was apologizing, and it had nothing to do with respect.

"I understand, Jebediah, that you caused considerable commotion in the barn after you left me last night."

"Actually, ma'am, *I* was not the cause."

"But I trust you found the incident cathartic?"

"On reflection, ma'am, yes, it seems that I did—considerably so."

"Then you feel better today."

"I shall, ma'am, if you will accept my . . . regrets."

"Oh, it all depends on me, does it? What a delightful sense of power you give me, Jebediah. Under the circumstances, I can only accept."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"And now if you'll excuse me . . ."

Miss Lucy went off smiling, and Jeb had the feeling that she had enjoyed the little exchange.

The rest of the day was a puzzle to Jeb. He sensed that there was something going on among the white people, something hidden from him; and like any good servant, especially a black one with murder in his heart, he wanted to know what it was.

Quentin Kimbrough did not appear for Sunday dinner or at any time that day. Mr. Paul Devereau did appear, however. Irish had said that Mr. Devereau was interested in Miss Lucy, but apparently Miss Amity had invited him, and she received most of his attention. Miss Lucy did not appear to notice. *Her* attention seemed to be on Dulcy who was abnormally quiet and distracted. Miss Amity was very much the flirtatious belle with Mr. Devereau, yet she, too, seemed oddly distracted. Yes, something was going on, and any black servant would want to know what, because his future, his very life, might literally depend on it.

The day waned. Mr. Devereau departed. Mr. Joel gruffly issued something resembling an apology for the Saturday evening incident: "'Bout last night. That shouldn't a-happened. Not your fault. Don't you worry about it." Supper was served, and shortly after nine o'clock Miss Lucy told Jeb he could return to his cottage.

He had hardly closed his door when she came out to visit him.

She looked small, standing at the foot of the steps.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but . . . you left this be-

hind last night. You said you wanted to read it again."

She had two volumes in her hands, and she handed him one of them. It was *The Merchant of Venice*.

"Why, thank you, Miss Lucy."

She held out the other volume. "And I thought you might enjoy this. It's called *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. My Uncle Joel says it isn't fit reading for a lady, but I found it amusing in spite of the sermonizing."

Jeb had already read the novel, but he accepted it with thanks—and considerable surprise. Miss Lucy said that if he wished to borrow books from the library, he had only to ask.

"That's very kind of you, ma'am."

Miss Lucy fidgeted, seemed reluctant to depart. "Jebediah, are you alone?"

"Why, yes, ma'am."

"May I come in for a minute?"

It was an unusual request for a white lady, alone. It could even be a dangerous request, for either of them. Jeb felt he could refuse it, and she would understand. But he was curious. He said, "If you wish, ma'am."

He stood aside as she entered the front room and looked around. He was glad it was clean and neat, the table uncluttered, the chairs dustfree.

"I spent a lot of time here as a child," Miss Lucy said. "Eben, our butler, was such a friend. I haven't been here since he died. You've made it very nice."

"That's mostly Leila's doing—and Miss Dulcy's."

"Dulcy's a dear."

Lucy's gaze wandered about the room, and when it returned to his face, her smile was gone.

"Jebediah, why do you hate us?" she asked.

Not only the question but the honest humility with which it was asked left him speechless. He could only stare at her.

"I know that you do," she said. "I suppose that most—most slaves hate their masters, and most masters fear their slaves. Our neighbors think we're fools, if not criminals, for treating our people . . . well, what we call decently. But we like to think that some of our people, at

least, love us as we love them. I love Momma Lucinda, Jebediah. Does she hate me as you do?"

"I wish you wouldn't keep saying I hate you, ma'am."

"All right, then explain to me. People say that it's *our* kind of people who cause all the trouble. *Our* kind of servant who turns on his masters and burns and kills and loots. And sometimes that does seem to be true. But why should that be?"

"Because you've given them a whiff of freedom, ma'am," Jeb heard himself saying. "Because you've let them see the light on the horizon, and it is beautiful. Because, unlike the man who is under the whip day after day and can dream only of survival or the blessing of death, they can *see* what it might be like to be free." He was saying too much, and he knew it. Hadn't he learned the lessons of the fields?

"Then you do think that Momma Lucinda hates us?"

"No, I don't think she hates you. She probably does love you. But she might harm you just the same, because she also loves her son. Because a bright boy like Irish will never be properly educated and free to make his own way. Oh, yes, he learned a little reading and writing in a plantation school. But he'll spend his days mixing toddies for his white masters. And if you were his mother, wouldn't that make you weep?" Why couldn't he stop talking?

"How odd," Miss Lucy said. "You seem to be justifying Mr. Turnage. If we don't all want to die murdered in our beds, he tells us, we must let him discipline our people, we must give him a free hand."

"No. Your Mr. Turnage only makes matters worse. Before he came, they were reasonably happy. They weren't free, but they looked around them and saw how much better off they were than the slaves on most neighboring plantations. They were decently fed and clothed, they weren't worked too hard, their masters weren't lazy. They weren't sold away, families were respected. They felt that their work was respected. They could even earn some money and save it or spend it as they pleased. Or at least this is what I hear from your people, ma'am."

"It's true," Miss Lucy said.

"Then your old overseer died, ma'am, and you hired Mr. Turnage, and within a year things began to change. You must know how they changed. Sabrehill became more and more like any other plantation."

"I know, but my father and uncle couldn't watch Mr. Turnage every minute. An overseer must be trusted—"

"That's not the point, Miss Lucy. The point is that whatever happiness your people once had, ma'am, they now know how easy it is to lose. How easily it can be taken from them at any instant. They know that their white masters can't, or won't, protect them. They know that the only safety is in freedom."

Miss Lucy stared at him. "Then you do think we're in danger here at Sabrehill."

"Perhaps in worse danger than your neighbors, thanks to Mr. Turnage, ma'am."

She sank into a chair. "I can't believe it. I just can't believe it." She looked up at him. "And if our people turned against us, you'd join with them, wouldn't you?"

Would he? His heart shouted *Yes!* But he had to be honest. He considered the question before answering.

"No, ma'am," he said slowly. "I don't think I would. I'd try to prevent such a thing happening. And not out of love for you, if you'll forgive me, ma'am, but because I would dread seeing slaves dying futilely. And their deaths would be futile."

"At least, at Sabrehill," Miss Lucy said, smiling unhappily, "servant and master can agree on that."

Jeb suddenly realized why he was speaking so freely to Miss Lucy. It was because every trace of the white condescension he had seen before had disappeared from her manner, and he had not the slightest fear of punishment. She was speaking to him as her intellectual equal, and it was the first time such a thing had happened to him in years.

Nevertheless he said, "Forgive me, Miss Lucy, ma'am. I'm forgetting my place. But you see, on the Pinkham plantation there were people I could discuss these things with, and I miss that."

"Your home plantation must have been a remarkable place."

"No, Miss Lucy, not at all. I dare say it was very much like Sabrehill, ma'am. The Pinkhams were kind. Their abolitionist sympathies made them unpopular with their neighbors. They gave me an opportunity to educate myself. Because I was so bright, I was promised further education and eventual freedom. Mr. Pinkham said that a boy of my intellectual capabilities was destined to become a leader of his people. I can't tell you how proud of me he was, ma'am. He called me his black son and said that I was as dear to him as his white."

"But what happened?"

"Why, I've told you, Miss Lucy, ma'am. When that dear, kind man went into debt, he sold me. But he sold me with tears in his eyes," Jeb said with a laugh. "My white father, who was so proud of me. Sold me, sold my black father, sold my mother."

"He actually sold you as field hands?"

"Oh, no, no, ma'am. Asking us to understand his position, he assured us—with tears in his eyes—that we would be sold as house servants. And as a family. We would be separated from our friends, or some of them, but not from each other. He was forced to close down his plantation, to sell slaves and land and retire to his house in Charleston, but we would be taken care of. He assured me that our future master understood the importance of my further education and that my manumission was merely a matter of time. And then I would soon be able to buy my parents free. He regretted that he could not keep his promise, but you see—*he couldn't afford it.*"

Jeb swung around to the door and stared out into the deepening night. Across the courtyard, Mr. Turnage was a shadow on his porch.

"And your new master didn't keep the promise," Miss Lucy said quietly. "He put you into the fields instead."

"Oh, much more than that, Miss Lucy."

"Sit with me, Jebediah. Sit with me and tell me about it."

Jeb had never told. He was not sure that he could. "I don't think you wish to hear, ma'am. And I shall never tell unless I can tell the exact truth."

"Tell me. Sit down and tell me."

He slumped into a chair.

"Please, Jeb . . ."

And so he told. He buried his face in his hands and began to talk, reliving it all. He told of how his new master, Mr. Osborn, had not wanted them for house servants at all. He had wanted Jeb as a field hand and a stud and had taken his parents as part of the bargain. He told of how he had nearly been castrated when he had refused—and been unable—to perform his services before a drunken audience. He told of the nightmares he had had since.

He spoke of his mother, a small beautiful woman, only thirty-three years old at the time of the sale—"only a little older than you, Miss Lucy, ma'am." He told of how she had fought off Mr. Osborn's advances, how she had injured him, how in consequence she had been spread naked between two posts and systematically whipped and raped by the plantation drivers, while husband and son looked on.

He spoke of his rebellious father, who had been driven to madness, who had been whipped to raw and bleeding meat, then allowed to die screaming from the bloody flux, with no one even trying to relieve his pain.

He told of how his mother had urged him to escape, and how he had refused to leave her. Of how, in her despair, she had then cut her wrists in order to free him. Of how her corpse had been allowed to rot in an open field as a lesson to those slaves who would "cheat their master out of his valuable property."

He told of his running and being captured again and again. Of the whippings, of his madness, of the calculated arrogance that saved him from turning into a groveling animal. Of his sale to Mr. Wingate when Mr. Osborn decided to cut his losses. Of his sale to the trader who had brought him to Sabrehill. Of the whips of Mr. Turnage and Cheney and the other Sabrehill drivers.

"It's not an unusual story, Miss Lucy, ma'am. It's not even the worst story. It's simply the way things are. It's the world that most slaves live in. . . ."

He told the whole story, found it pouring out, found himself weeping it, bleeding it. Miss Lucy was silent. When

at last he was finished and raised his head, she was gone. He had no idea of when she had left.

Her father was the first to mention what had happened. It happened on a steaming hot morning while his horse, Thunder, was being readied. Her Uncle Joel had already departed for the fields, and they were alone in the office.

"Amity," Aaron Sabre began cautiously, "you're no child, and I don't want to interfere in something that's not my business. But should I ask why we haven't seen young Quentin Kimbrough for quite a while?"

The question brought a feeling of shock. "Why, I don't know, Papa. Has it been so long?" She knew exactly how long it had been. It would be eleven days that evening. "Now I think about it, it has been quite a while."

Her father nodded slowly, looking straight at her, and her cheeks began to burn. He saw through her pose of indifference, and she was humiliated by it.

"As I say, I don't want to interfere. But if anything's gone wrong, if there's anything I can do as your father—"

"But what could possibly go wrong? I swan, Papa, you all take my friendship with Mr. Quentin Kimbrough too seriously. Quentin has no claim on me, nor me on him. He just knows he's welcome to come and go here when he pleases, and I reckon they're as busy over at the Kimbrough place these days as we are here."

She was talking too much, and she forced herself to stop. Her face felt as if it were glowing. Her father nodded again and said, "I reckon they are."

She watched as he left the office, mounted Thunder, and rode toward the east service lane. At that moment she hated him for the embarrassment she felt. If he had been a true Charleston gentleman, she thought, he would never have asked her such a question. But no, his mother and his first wife had been high country people, and from them he had derived a quiet disdain for "self-styled aristocrats with nothing better to do than drink wine, fight duels, and avoid honest labor." Though a true aristocrat by inheritance, he regarded himself as a "plain-spoken farmer," and at that moment Amity hated him for it.

Still smarting, she turned to the accounts she had told

her Uncle Joel she would check. It was not ladylike work, any more than it was ladylike to have the head for business her uncle claimed for her, but it pleased Joel Sabre to have her do it. Uncle Joel, at least, would always be on her side.

She could not concentrate. She felt a need to *do* something, to take steps, to rearrange things, to make new patterns. For eleven days she had searched for some way to replace Kimbrough Hall in her dreams. For eleven days she had looked for a way to get revenge on Dulcy. And she could find neither. If nothing else, her father was always in her way. It seemed to her now that he had been in her way, watching her, holding her down, all of her life.

She could not breathe. A band seemed to tighten around her chest, constricting her. She got up from Joel Sabre's desk and staggered to the door, gasping for air.

What the hell's wrong with me? she wondered. *They're doing this to me, all of them.*

She saw Leila chatting with Irish in the kitchen door. *Damn black bitch*, she thought. Amity had not seen her since the previous evening. Most likely she had spent the night in Jeb's bed, in his arms, under his naked thrusting body.

Amity had to do something, and she knew what it would be.

She stepped out of the office and locked the door. Crossing the courtyard, she called, "Leila, you come with me. I mean right now. Y'hear?" Not very ladylike, she thought, but at the moment she didn't feel very ladylike.

She hurried into the big house and up the stairs to her bedroom. Her bedroom seemed more private than the office, a better place for what she was about to do. Leila entered behind her, looking apprehensive, and Amity gave her a reassuring smile.

She settled herself into a chair facing the black girl. "Now," she said, "you'll recall we had a little conversation a few weeks back. About one Jebediah Hayes, our houseboy. Remember?"

"Yes," Leila said slowly, "I remember." She still looked apprehensive. She still did not return the smile.

"And you and me, we came to a kind of agreement."

"Agreement, Amity?"

Amity felt her smile slipping. "You know what I'm talking about. I said that if you marry up with Jebediah, I'd keep you both with me."

"Oh. Yeah."

"Well, for heaven's sake, don't act like you forgot all about it. You were supposed to take his mind off of any other gals. You remember that?"

Leila's brow pinched. "I remember."

"You musta done a good job of it. Three or four nights you came back here real late, and last night you didn't come back at all. You spend the night with him?"

Frowning, Leila turned to look out the window. "Yes, I was with him all night."

"Then you two must be getting along right good."

"Oh, yes. Yes, we're good friends, all right."

"After that first time, you told me you liked . . . being with him. You said he was the best you ever had."

"Yes, ma'am."

Amity could not understand Leila's manner. "Well, then, I reckon he likes doing it with you just as much?"

"Reckon so."

"Then you figure he's ready to settle down with you?"

Leila at last looked directly at Amity again, and the worry in her eyes deepened. "Well, I don't think so," she said. "Not yet."

As if by contagion, Amity began to feel some of Leila's apprehension. "Oh? How long do you figure it'll take?"

Leila's fingers nervously laced and relaced. "Well, I don't know. I'm not sure Jeb is the settling-down kind at all, Amity, honey. I'm not sure this is such a good idea."

"What do you mean?" Amity's face suddenly felt numb and stiff.

"I mean it ain't as if I was the only one Jeb been doing it with. I know he done it with Vidette at least twice. And he done it with Lida, and he done it with both Coffey sisters the same night. And I guess he's had himself Geneva, and there was—"

Amity heard no more. She saw the small, secret gleam of triumph in Leila's anxious eyes. She had been tricked,

fooled, thwarted. After all, Jeb could hardly wed every female he spread.

"God damn you," she said softly.

They were laughing at her, all of them. Dulcy, Lucy, her father. Leila, Jebediah, all the other niggers. Whites and blacks alike, they were defying her, taking what she wanted, what was hers, and laughing at her.

Because of Quentin. Because of Jebediah and Leila.

"Get out of here," she said, rising from her chair. "You ain't sleeping here no more. From now on, you sleep in the field quarters—"

"Amity Sabre—"

"*Miss Amity Sabre to you, you rutting nigger animal!*" Amity screamed. "*Miss Amity Sabre to you, and you damn well better never forget it! Miss Amity Sabre, God damn your black soul! You get your shit out!*"

Leila threw open the door and ran through it. Amity followed. She saw nothing but Leila's terrified face looking back over a shoulder. She heard nothing but her own banshee wail. An enormous force seemed to be driving her, a force to which she had given herself up entirely, and she knew that force was going to kill Leila. Still shrieking, she raised curved fingers like talons; talons that came ripping down on Leila's shoulders. Then she shoved.

Leila appeared to be floating slowly, slowly down the stairs. Her scream blended with Amity's. Her eyes were brilliant with terror.

She hit the landing with jolting, sickening force, and something snapped—bones. Her scream became one of agony as well as fear, and her eyes rolled high in her head.

Mindless still, shrieking, Amity found herself hurtling after the small body crumpled on the landing. She watched as her hands came up to tear that small body apart. She watched as Leila, still screaming, rose to her knees and tried to go down the lower stairs. She found herself behind Leila, and once again those hands thrust out, struck, shoved Leila into the air. The black girl landed on the stairs headdown and rolled the rest of the way into the hall, end over end, like an unloved doll flung away.

Amity might have finished her then. She took two long steps down the lower flight of stairs and was about to jump. She would have struck Leila on the spine and either killed her or crippled her for life. But somehow Leila managed to roll, to crawl, to scramble away from the foot of the stairs. And then it was too late.

She didn't jump. She straightened up and leaned, panting, against the banister. She was no longer screaming.

Teach the bitch a lesson, she thought feebly. Teach them all a lesson, God damn them, all of them.

She went slowly down the remaining steps, feeling incredibly spent and weak. She was bathed in sweat. Her throat was raw, and her breath came to her in irregular gasps. When she reached the foot of the stairs and looked around, Leila seemed to have disappeared. That was just as well—she didn't want to have to look at the black bitch.

She'd teach them. Somehow she'd teach them all. She'd put them on their goddam knees.

Lucy was crying when Momma Lucinda and Dulcy brought her into the hallway—crying fiercely, quietly, brokenly. Momma Lucinda held her on her feet and guided her toward the stairs while Dulcy tried to help. *She must be crying for Leila*, Amity thought dully. *Maybe I killed her after all*. But why would Lucy, or anybody else, cry for Leila?

As if in answer, Dulcy turned to her, and it was a face Amity had never seen before. Never before had it been so drained, the eyes so large and dark, the features so twisted by the strange and inexplicable.

"It's Papa," she whispered. "He's dead."

Amity watched as the other three women went up the stairs.

Their papa dead?

The enormity of the thought was too much for her. How could her father possibly be dead on an ordinary hot sweat-sticky July morning when she had been quarreling with Leila? What had Dulcy meant? Why should she say such an extraordinary, such an impossible, thing as that her father was dead?

But she had said it, and said it in that terrible way. And Lucy had wept as if broken by grief.

Amity wandered out onto the piazza, looked at the clear blue sky and the green parkland, and waited for her own grief to come. A man was dead, and she had loved him. Of course she had; she was his daughter. They had had their differences, their times of strain, their quarrels, but still he was her father, and she had loved him.

She continued to wait for the pain and the grief. And as she waited, something occurred to her.

Her father no longer stood in her way.

Seven

So Aaron Sabre was dead. His horse, Thunder, had shied at a snake and thrown him, and his head had hit a rock. He had died instantly.

Jeb felt a kind of grim satisfaction. White folks could die too. But then he remembered his father's death. His father: a small man, younger than Mr. Aaron, with a back so whipped it looked like raw ground meat. He had died screaming, as he writhed in his own bloody shits, in the scarlet liquid that the flux ground out of his tortured body. White people caught the flux too, but most of them, like Mr. Aaron, contrived to die in a cleaner, less painful way. So to hell with Mr. Aaron, Jeb thought.

He did his job well. He was quick, silent, unobtrusive. Invisible. Guests began to arrive almost at once, and he served coffee and set Irish to mixing drinks. When Mr. Aaron's body was brought back, he carried it up the stairs and laid it out on the bed. Miss Lucy managed to calm herself, and had him send for certain of the older servants to help prepare the body. When they wept for

Mr. Aaron, he hid his anger and disgust behind a blank, impassive face.

My father had a right to die this way too.

He dispatched messengers, set up a buffet, announced guests.

Mr. Paul Devereau arrived in the afternoon. Jeb had an almost intuitive grasp of where everyone was in the house at any given moment, and he immediately led Mr. Devereau through the dining room and into the library, where Miss Lucy was alone.

"Paul . . ."

"Lucy, I came as soon as I heard."

Jeb stepped silently, discretely, out of the library. In the dining room he stepped to one side of the door and listened.

"If it's any comfort at all, Lucy, I do know what you're going through." The voice was low and warm. "Don't forget, I went through the same thing just this spring."

"I know, Paul."

"And I want to be helpful in any way I can."

"Good of you . . . so good of you."

The voices lowered, almost whispered. Jeb strained to hear. Anything might turn out to be useful, anything at all.

". . . arrangements . . . ?"

"Not yet. I . . . I hardly know where to start."

"Let me handle everything for you."

"If you could help us . . ."

"Just let me know your wishes."

Silence. Anything could have been happening within the library. They could have been approaching the door. With a touch of panic, Jeb started to leave just as Mr. Devereau spoke again.

"Lucy, may I give you one piece of advice, based on experience?"

"Of course."

"Don't prolong it. Get it all over with as quickly as possible. By tomorrow, if it can be arranged. Certainly by day after tomorrow. It's no good, letting the pain go on and on."

Yes, Jeb thought, *shovel him under. A body ripens*

fast in the middle of the summer, and why waste the ice? He thought of his mother's body lying naked in a field. He and the others had been forced to look at her. The slashed wrists had gaped. The open eyes had stared until the crows had taken them. "*See, nigger, what's gonna happen to you . . .*" The body had withered and dried as the vultures picked it clean, and the dogs had scattered the bones. "*See, nigger . . .*"

"You realize, Paúl, that we . . . that we have a problem." The voice brought Jeb back to the present.

"Now, Lucy, there need be no problem."

"But I'm afraid there will be—"

"No. We won't allow the matter to become a problem. It's simply a matter of being firm and . . ."

The voices lowered again. Jeb was curious as to what the "problem" might be, but he had stayed too long. He hurried out of the dining room.

The house grew more crowded. A constant stream of people flowed through the downstairs bed chamber, up the southwest stairs to Aaron Sabré's rooms, and back down again. More wine and whiskey had to be fetched from the cellar and opened. Dr. Paulson preferred rum: a fresh bottle of rum was fetched. More food had to be set out. Mr. Devereau had certain minor requests: a cushion for a guest with a gouty foot, some Holland gin for Major Kimbrough.

The day was so busy that it passed swiftly. Twice he managed to get away to his cottage to see how Leila was and found her sleeping. When she had come screaming out of the house, hugging her oddly angled left forearm, he had taken her to the gardner who had deftly set the broken bones. Later Dr. Paulson had examined the set and pronounced it perfect.

"But what happened to her?"

"Amity," Leila had sobbed. "Amity, she pushed me down the stairs!"

"Christ! You look like she shoved you off the roof!"

The doctor had given Leila something to make her sleep.

Mr. Turnage came "to pay his respects." When he came back down the stairs, there was a faint glow of

amusement in his eyes and a slight smile on his lips. "Well, Jebediah," he said softly, "looks like there's gonna be some changes made around here."

Jeb gave no sign of hearing Mr. Turnage or even of seeing him.

"What do you think, Jeb boy? There gonna be some changes, huh?"

Jeb saw Mr. Devereau approaching. Mr. Turnage did not. Mr. Devereau was frowning, as if he had overheard.

"Mr. Turnage!"

The overseer looked around, startled.

"Mr. Turnage, do you know who I am?"

"Why . . . yes, sir."

"Good. Mr. Turnage, you are to call all of the hands out of the fields. They are to remain quietly in their quarters. Except for the necessary tasks, they need do no work until the day after the funeral."

"Well, I dunno. It's not good for the hands to be lazying around—"

"Did you hear me, Mr. Turnage?"

"I better consult with Mr. Joel—"

"You'll do nothing of the kind. You have your instructions. You will get on with them, Mr. Turnage—" Mr. Devereau snapped his fingers loudly before the overseer's face—"now!"

Mr. Turnage turned and walked out of the house, his pace deliberately slow.

The day was not without its good moments.

Jeb never noticed the coming of dark. Suddenly the daylight was gone and had been gone for hours, and carriages came up the long avenue of oaks, circled the torchlit courtyard, and eventually departed. Finally, weary and hungry, he put Irish in charge of the house and went to the kitchen to eat and rest.

He was sitting on the west steps of the kitchen when he saw the door of his cottage open and Leila step out. She held her broken arm in its sling close against her and walked as if every step was painful. He resisted an impulse to go help her: each nigger had to learn to cope with his own pain.

But he did not thrust her away when she at last reached

him and sank down onto his lap. She leaned against his chest and hung her head. "Oh, Jebediah," she sighed, "I do hurt."

He said nothing. In the darkness of the steps, there was only a little light from the kitchen and less from the mansion and the courtyard. It was restful.

"When will I stop hurting, Jeb?" she asked.

"Never."

"Now, just you don't talk to that child that way," Momma Lucinda said sharply from the kitchen. "Just you don't!"

"Most of the pain will go away in a few days," Jeb said more gently. "An arm takes five to six weeks to heal. It won't hurt that long."

"Well, at least I'm alive. They're burying poor Mr. Aaron."

"They shouldn't," Jeb said, thinking of a dead woman lying in an open field.

"What?"

"Nothing."

A murmur of voices came from the courtyard. A mosquito sang, and Jeb slapped it away.

"You know what Miss Amity is making me do?"

"You told me."

"Making me sleep out in the field quarters. Not even the big-house quarters. Got to go way out to the women's barrack."

"Well, when Miss Lucy is feeling better, you speak to her. Maybe she'll change that."

"No. Because Amity says I belong to her. And when she sets her mind on something, nobody stops her. Except Mr. Aaron, and he's dead now."

Leila shook her head, rolling it against Jeb's chest. "Oh, Jebediah, you don't know her. I don't guess anybody on this here plantation knows her like me. You watch her with her beaux, and you think there ain't nobody so sweet. All smiles and big eyes. All candy and syrup and ice cream. So soft and pretty.

"But when she's alone with me, she ain't always so soft and pretty. Her eyes could kill you, and even her voice gets different. She shows her teeth, and 'You nigger

shit,' she says. 'You rutting bitch. You animal, you dirt.' She got a demon in her, Jeb, a demon, and that's the demon talking.

"And all these years I been with her. All these years I take care of her and lick her feet and kiss her ass. Pick up her clothes, give her her bath, clean up her mess. Play with her, sleep with her, pleasure her in bed. And smile when she calls me an animal. 'You surely are an animal,' she says, and I just smile and say, 'Reckon I am!' And smile and smile and smile." She turned her face to Jeb's chest and began quietly to weep. "Oh, Jebediah, I do hurt."

Hatred rose up in Jeb like a hot black tide.

Something tore at Amity, and she supposed it was grief. It brought tears to her eyes as she sat with her two sisters and her Uncle Joel in the front pew of Riverboro's Episcopal Church. It made her hide her face, later in the graveyard, when she heard the words: "Unto Almighty God we commend the soul of our brother departed, and we commit his body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

It tore at her as they rode from the graveyard back to Sabrehill. She rode beside her Uncle Joel, of course; crying and sweating, he clutched at her hand. Opposite them, Lucy closed her eyes as if in some exquisite pain. Dulcy looked bewildered, frightened. Grief wrenched at Amity and brought a sob.

At the house, Jebediah helped them from the carriage and assisted Uncle Joel to the library. Dulcy complained that she felt faint, and Lucy helped her up the stairs to her room. Several carriages followed in the immediate wake of the Sabre carriage, and one of the first guests to arrive was Paul Devereau. Amity drew him away from the others in the central passage.

"Mr. Devereau—Mr. Paul, honey—I have no idea of how many people will stop by today to express their condolences." She put a hand on his arm and moved closer. "And you can see what a strain this has been for Uncle Joel and my sister Lucy, not to mention myself. Would it be asking too much for you to stay a little

while and talk to people and, well, help out a little? You don't know what it would mean."

The deep-set eyes held hers coolly and steadily, as if reading her secret intentions, and for an instant Amity felt that she had made an error. But then Paul Devereau covered her hand with his own and nodded. "Why, of course I'll stay, Miss Amity," he said. "I'll happily do anything I can to be helpful."

"I really do appreciate—" She broke off as Lucy came down the stairs.

"Paul," Lucy said, "I wonder if possibly you could stay awhile—"

"Never mind, I've already asked him. Thank you, Paul."

Lucy's eyes were faintly surprised. Amity slipped her hand from under Paul Devereau's and walked away, thinking, *She ain't gonna have it her way around here no more.*

Once again the house began to fill up, surprisingly so considering the time of year, when many had fled either to Charleston or to the high country. But there were local planters who insisted on being on their lands in this season, and there were old friends who had traveled many miles. A death was, after all, an important social occasion.

Amity made a point of meeting each new arrival, greeting the newcomer, if possible, before Lucy did. For many years, since the death of Dulcy's mother, Lucy had been the mistress of Sabrehill. Their father had needed a woman to run the house, a woman to act as his hostess, and as the eldest sister by almost a decade, Lucy naturally performed that role. But there was no reason for that to go on, Amity thought. *I'm grown up now, and it's as much my house as it is hers. And Papa ain't here to say otherwise.*

She gave Jeb and the other servants brisk orders. She asserted herself as hostess among the guests. She took charge.

"Amity . . ."

She looked around to see that Quentin had arrived.

Quentin, after nearly two weeks absence. Quentin, the betrayer.

"Why, Mr. Kimbrough," she said, forcing a smile, "it must be almost a week since we've seen you."

Quentin looked surprised. "Longer than that."

"Has it been? I know it's been days and days. 'Cause on the very morning of his death, my papa was saying, 'Where's my friend Quentin Kimbrough? Miss him!' He was might fond of you, Quentin."

Quentin stammered his sympathy. "I was awfully sorry—sorry to hear . . ."

"Of course you are, Quentin. Now, if you'll excuse me . . ."

She attempted to turn away, but Quentin touched her arm and stepped in front of her. "I know you're awfully busy, Amity, but I—I don't see Dulcy anywhere. I'd like to tell her—to tell her—"

Oh, I'll bet you would. The puppy-dog look in Quentin's eyes was maddening, and for an instant Amity's temper threatened to break out of her control. She felt herself hardening, felt her gaze narrowing on Quentin's too-handsome face. She would have been pleased to tear it apart.

"I'm sorry," she said, forcing calm, "but you must understand that this has been terribly hard on poor Dulcy. The best thing for her now is rest, and she'd been put to bed. I don't know when you'll be able to see her again, but I'll certainly tell her that your thoughts are with her."

"I see. Well . . . thank you."

Without another word, she walked away from Quentin. Kimbrough Hall, her dreams, her plans—he had brought them all back to her. But he and Dulcy had ruined them, and she still had no plan for revenge. Quentin was still clearly enamored of Dulcy, and there was nothing, nothing in the world, that Amity could do about it. Dulcy would have Kimbrough Hall.

The afternoon wore on. More guests arrived, food and drink were served, guests departed. Uncle Joel appeared briefly, disappeared again. Dulcy kept to her room. Lucy moved wanly from one guest to another and appeared content to allow Amity to manage the rest of the day.

The last guests began their departure. Paul Devereau and Lucy drank Madeira alone in the library, and the ball-room and parlors fell shadowed and empty. Amity held the last hand and kissed the last cheek. She then decided she had neglected her uncle too long and went to seek him.

She found him in the office, sprawled back in his chair, his face reddened by the last rays of sunlight through the window. He was no longer weeping, but his face looked heavy and tired. An open jug stood on his desk, and his breath was strong with whiskey.

"They all gone?" he asked. His voice was as weary as she had ever heard it, and faintly slurred.

"All but Mr. Paul Devereau, Uncle Joel."

Joel Sabre rubbed his eyes. "Good. Got something to show you."

"Oh? Now, what could that be?"

"Don't know if I should show it to you or not."

"Now, you know you can show me anything, Uncle Joel."

"Ought to burn it."

Amity was intrigued. "Not without showing me first, Uncle Joel. You know we don't have any secrets from each other. Why, if my Uncle Joel and I can't trust each other, who can?"

He picked up a piece of paper from the desk and thrust it at her, almost flung it at her. She picked it up and stared at it. At first the words seemed almost incomprehensible, they were so unexpected.

"I came out here and started looking around," Joel Sabre said. "Knew I'd have to go through Aaron's desk and his papers and things sooner or later. Just started looking here and there through his desk, not looking for anything in particular. Found a lockbox. Lock didn't even work right. Musta seen it ten thousand times. Sat there, right in front of me. Took a look in it a while ago and found that."

Amity's heart pounded. Her head felt as if it might explode. She knew for the first time what it was like to feel that you were dreaming while wide awake. But no

dream she had ever had, no wild hope of revenge, had ever been like this.

Joel Sabre took a gulp of whiskey from a glass. "You know what that means?" he asked.

"I surely do know, Uncle Joel," Amity said, trying to steady her voice. "I surely do know. What it means is, our poor little Dulcy is a nigger."

They sat together in a circle in the library: Amity, Joel Sabre, Paul Devereau, Lucy. Dulcy was still in her room, and there seemed to be no need to call her. After a short discussion in the office, Amity was reasonably confident that her uncle would follow her lead.

"I take it you don't want a formal reading of the will at present," Paul Devereau said.

Amity shook her head. "Why don't you just give us the idea of it. I've been told, but I want to see if what I remember is right." She looked at Lucy, who nodded her agreement, and Joel Sabre said, "Go ahead, tell them. Tell them how it fits in with my will, if you want."

"Very well. In my view, both wills are overly complicated, but I think I can make the essentials clear enough." His steady eyes on each woman in turn, Paul Devereau spoke slowly and distinctly. "First of all, your father and your uncle agreed that whichever survived the other was to become co-executor, with a lawyer, of the other's will. They also agreed and stipulated that the survivor was to continue until death or retirement to operate those plantation holdings which they have owned and operated together these many years." He looked at Joel, who nodded approval. "Furthermore, the survivor is given a great deal of discretion in the administration and interpretation of the other's will."

"Aaron wanted all that power over *my* share," Joel said with a surprising note of resentment, "so I said, by God, I wanted it over *his* share."

"The check on the abuse of that power," Paul Devereau went on, "is, of course, the co-executor—originally my father and at present myself. The intent, by the way, was to maintain Sabrehill as an entity."

"Something terrible just happened to Papa," Amity said. "God forbid that anything should happen to Uncle Joel, but if it does . . ."

"There's always an executor in the family," Joel said. "One of you will be appointed to follow me. Soon as I decide which."

Amity nodded to Paul Devereau to continue.

"Your father had various monies, business shares, and so forth of his own. Again, the executors have great discretionary powers as to their administration, but basically they are to be divided equally by the heirs. A share is to be held in trust if an heir, like Dulcy, has not yet reached her eighteenth birthday.

"And now we come to Sabrehill itself—real property, servants and hands, and operating fund. There are contingencies we need not go into here, because they do not apply. Basically, your father and your uncle each willed his share of Sabrehill to his first son—or to the other's first son if one of them had no children.

"As it turned out, your uncle has had no children, and your father had only daughters. Now, a number of contingencies are provided for in the will—in both wills—but the hope is that at least one of the daughters will produce a son who, lacking any other fortune, will have the aptitude and character to be master of Sabrehill."

"The wills go into that?" Lucy asked, surprised. "Such intangibles as aptitude and character?"

Paul Devereau looked at her sharply. "Not so intangible as to be beyond assessment, Miss Lucy."

"And if both Amity and Dulcy produce sons? Unlikely as it is, if I should marry and have a son?"

The lawyer shrugged. "I think you know the answer to that, Miss Lucy. Two brothers have operated Sabrehill for years—why not two cousins? Or even three. If the situation becomes personally awkward, Sabrehill is large enough to be divided—though the headquarters and main tracts are to be maintained *as* Sabrehill."

"Or one heir or another, a cousin or two, may be eliminated from inheriting on the basis of 'aptitude' or 'talent.'" Lucy spoke ironically and shook her head. "Paul, I do have faith in you, but you must admit that it

sounds like my father delivered himself into the hands of his lawyers."

Paul Devereau shrugged again but continued to look hard at Lucy, as if weighing her objection. "I think I said that I personally would prefer a simpler will, and your father did speak of making certain changes. But this is what we have to deal with. We must do the best we can with it."

"It's what Aaron wanted," Joel Sabre said defensively.

"And that's the whole thing?" Amity asked.

Paul Devereau smiled. "Well, hardly. I've given you a *precis* of some of the principle points—I thought that was what you wanted." He turned to Joel. "Have I been accurate, sir?"

"Accurate enough."

"Shall I go into financial allowances, domicile rights, dower—"

"Not now," Amity said. She was thinking hard and fast, and bracing herself to throw her grenade. The piece of paper she had brought from the office was growing damp in her palm.

"All this you've been telling us," she said, "it really only has to do with Lucy and me, doesn't it? I mean, you talk about Dulcy, but Dulcy doesn't really count in it, does she?"

Her eyes widening, Lucy turned slowly to face Amity. Paul Devereau's face went blank. After a moment, a faint smile began to play over it.

"Why, what makes you say that?" he asked.

In answer, Amity leaned forward in her chair and held out the bill of sale for Dulcy's mother. Paul Devereau rose and took it and sat back down again. He looked at the paper, and his smile widened.

"Oh, yes," he murmured. "I've been wondering where this was."

He handed it to Lucy, who looked at it almost disinterestedly and handed it back again.

Amity stared at them, unable to understand their lack of reaction. This wasn't at all what she had expected. "Well, what are you gonna do about it?" she asked. "Gonna call Dulcy down here and tell her?"

"That won't be necessary," Lucy said. "She already knows. She's known for years. Papa thought it best to prepare her—"

"Great God almighty!" Joel Sabre exploded. He sat up, his face flushed with anger. "I'm beginning to understand now. You two have known about Dulcy and her momma all along. You knew and Dulcy knew and God only knows who else knew. Maybe the whole world knew, except for Amity and me."

"No, sir," Paul Devereau said, "it wasn't like that."

Joel Sabre ignored him. He rose from his chair and paced the room. "I'll tell you something. All my life I looked up to Aaron. Whenever I didn't know what to do, I asked myself, 'What would Aaron do?' And yet he didn't trust me enough to tell me about Dulcy and her momma."

"You differed with him on the matter of slavery and the black, sir."

Joel shook his head and slumped back into his chair. "He didn't trust me."

"Just tell me one thing," Amity said. "Was Dulcy's momma ever manumitted?"

"No, she was not."

"Then Dulcy's not only black, she was born a slave. Has *she* been manumitted?"

"No, not yet."

The triumph was beyond anything Amity had dreamed of. "Then she's still a slave and the property of Sabre-hill!"

Lucy was shocked. "Amity, do you know what you're saying? About your own sister?"

"You're damn right I know. I'm saying that Dulcy Sabre can't inherit a goddam thing from my papa. I'm saying that Dulcy Sabre is part of the property that *gets* inherited!"

"But you must know that wasn't Papa's intention!" Lucy looked ill, on the verge of fainting.

"I only know the facts. Mr. Paul, does that will mention Dulcy in any way?"

"No, it specifies no heir by name. And it could hardly

mention Miss Dulcy, since Mr. Aaron had not even met her mother at the time the will was written."

"There you are. I don't believe my papa ever intended any part of Sabrehill to go to Dulcy or any of her nigger sons or to any other slave."

"But there were reasons Dulcy and her mother weren't freed," Lucy said. "Tell her, Paul."

Paul Devereau looked from one woman to the other before answering, and Amity felt that she was getting his range for the first time. The Devereau plantation was deeply in debt to Sabrehill, and Paul Devereau was trying to gauge where the power at Sabrehill lay; where it would lie in the future. He probably still thought he should court Lucy, and Amity might have to work hard to change that.

"Yes," she said, "tell me."

"There's not much to tell. You know now that Mr. Aaron purchased his second wife in Charleston, rather than meeting her in New Orleans, as he always claimed. He took her north, married her, and brought her back here. My father knew of the purchase and deeply resented it. The first Mrs. Aaron was a Devereau and a third cousin, and he felt that the Devereau name was being degraded and insulted by such a match."

"It was," Amity said sharply.

"With any other two gentlemen, there would almost certainly have been a duel. As it was, my father agreed to keep silent on one condition. The second Mrs. Sabre, her children, and all future descendents were to remain slaves as long as they remained in the South. They were to be freed only if they went north and agreed to stay there."

"And Papa went along with that. That sure don't—that doesn't sound like he wanted Dulcy to have any part of Sabrehill."

"I can tell you exactly what Papa hoped for and expected," Lucy said with a weary sigh. "He planned to free Dulcy very quietly and discretely up north. It was to happen when she was eighteen and could withstand any scandal that might arise. If she decided to stay up north,

he wanted her to receive a share of Sabrehill's income as long as she needed it."

"I don't believe that!"

"He expected you, Amity, to marry very well, probably to Quentin Kimbrough. He hoped that I would marry and give Sabrehill its next master. If not, he hoped that Dulcy would do so."

"That can't be true. Is any of that in the will?"

"No," Paul Devereau said, "not specifically."

"Would you want anyone with a drop of black blood running Sabrehill, Uncle Joel? Sabrehill is yours too. Do you think my papa would do a thing like that to you?"

Joel Sabre shook his head. "I got to think. Aaron always said, when you're not sure, just keep your mouth shut until you know. I got to think."

Amity looked about the room. Lucy looked deeply tired, her eyes darkly underscored. Paul Devereau was very alert, observing, weighing, calculating. Uncle Joel merely looked confused. Amity smiled to herself, tasting her triumph. She could handle these people, she was certain. All of them.

"Well, I'll tell you all something," she said. "Dulcy is a nigger slave who ain't—isn't—going to get one little bit of Sabrehill. And if anyone thinks different, I'll have him in court so fast—"

She broke off as she saw Paul Devereau's eyes turn toward the doorway of the room.

"Thank you, Amity," Dulcy said softly. "You've always been such a kind and loving sister."

Never before in her life had she had such a sense of power. She felt invincible. It was as if until this day she had been a child, but now she had all the strengths and prerogatives of adulthood. And she meant to use them.

"I'm sorry, Dulcy, honey," she said, trying to sound sincere, as she left the library, "but I'm only defending my rights. I'm just glad that you knew about your black blood so that the news doesn't come as a shock to you."

She turned away without waiting for an answer.

Dulcy's good as dead, she thought. Unless Lucy and Mr. Paul Devereau somehow manage to help her. Got to

get Paul on my side and get rid of Lucy. Get quit of her once and for all. And I can do it. I can do it.

She looked for a chance to be alone with Paul Devereau and found it when he was about ready to leave. The sun was well down, and they stood together in the darkness outside the courtyard door while he waited for his carriage. She circled restlessly around him, trying to make him aware of her as a physical presence.

"My, Mr. Paul, honey," she said, "that will does sound awfully complicated."

He was businesslike. "Frankly, Miss Amity, it's a mess. I don't know why my father consented to it, but I suppose he had no choice. The real problem will come when you ladies marry and have children. And if you go to court, Miss Amity, you might tie the estate up for years."

Amity moved closer to him and took his hand. "Well, now, I don't know as there's any absolute need for me to go to court, Mr. Paul. Do you suppose I could read the will sometime?"

"Of course. A will is a public record. You're entitled to read it."

"But I'm not sure I'd understand it. Maybe you would be real nice and go over it with me and explain it."

"I'd be glad to do that, Miss Amity." His voice was cool but not disinterested.

She laughed and swung his hand between them. "You can just call me Amity when we're alone like this, Paul. My goodness, you've known me since I was a baby."

His eyes were fast on her, trying to read her. "That's true," he said, "I have. Would you believe, Amity, that I remember your baptism?"

"You do, Paul?"

"I was just a boy. And now I hear that you're practically engaged to young Quentin Kimbrough—"

"Quentin!" She laughed again. "Honey, whatever you heard about me and my good friend Quentin, you can forget. When I marry, it'll be to a man."

He said nothing to that, merely looked steadily at her with those deep-set, rather piercing eyes. It was disconcerting, but she saw that she definitely had his interest.

He would give her further thought, and the thoughts would grow . . . and grow. . . .

A stable boy drove a carriage up, and Paul Devereau climbed onto the seat.

"Now, you come see us more often, Paul. At a time like this, it's a comfort to have old friends about."

"I'm pleased that I'm welcome—and that you think of me as a friend, Amity. I mean that."

"Oh, you are! A dear one!"

He drove off—not yet hooked, perhaps, but close enough to it.

Oh, he would be suspicious for a time. He would think he knew what her game was, and actually he would be right. But when he found out how far she would go—and she would go as far as she damn well had to—he would start thinking she really was in love with him. *I can take him from Lucy anytime!* she thought with vicious pleasure.

And now to do something about Lucy.

The whole scheme had come to her in the office as she had stared at the bill of sale and realized its implications for Dulcy. She did not know the details, only the broad outlines, but all the pieces were falling into place. And the scheme would work, she was absolutely certain, because of its very outrageousness.

She could barely make out Mr. Turnage sitting on his porch, as he so often did in the evening. She walked toward him, humming a tune, swinging her skirt.

"Why, good evening, Mr. Turnage. No, no, don't get up. . . ."

Again, it was easy. He was disconcerted and worried at first, because she had always had a short tongue and a hard eye for him. But she soon put him at ease.

"My, it's been such a long day. So glad to be all alone again. It's nice here—don't know why I haven't gotten out here to talk to you before. I really do think we ought to be better friends."

She stretched to let him see the line of her breasts, stood close to him, walked around him, touched his shoulders. He was delighted. He brought another chair out onto the porch for her, and she at last settled down to business.

She leaned toward Turnage and for a moment let a hand rest lightly on his knee. "Mr. Turnage, I've got a confession to make."

The knee trembled. "Why, what's that, Miss Amity?"

"Mr. Turnage, I'm enjoying getting to know you better, but the truth is, I came out here with an ulterior motive. I came out here because I have a problem, and I badly need your help."

"Well, anything I can do . . ."

She withdrew her hand. "Really, I'm almost too embarrassed to tell you about it."

"Now, Miss Amity . . ."

Eventually she told, with modestly downcast eyes. "It's my older sister, Lucy, Mr. Turnage. She's a spinster, as you know, but not without human feelings. And you know how spinster ladies tend to get when they reach a certain age. They . . . well, they tend to go sniffing around. Now don't you misunderstand me, Mr. Turnage! There is nothing immoral about my sister! I know she would *never* do the things some maiden ladies do!"

"'Course not, Miss Amity!"

"But I am so worried about her. Do you know, Mr. Turnage, that she sometimes visits the houseboy, Jebediah, in his cottage? Just the two of them?"

"Why, yes," Turnage said slowly, cautiously, "I do know that."

"I thought you might have seen, sitting here on your porch. How many times, Mr. Turnage?"

"Oh, maybe three or four."

"I know of at least half a dozen times in the last couple of weeks. And there might have been more. Now, that ain't—that isn't right, Mr. Turnage. And even though I know my sister hasn't done anything wrong, I'm getting worried sick for her. Why, that nigger could get the wrong idea about her, just 'cause she's softhearted."

"You're right there, Miss Amity," Turnage said warmly. "You got to watch niggers with white women."

"He could take advantage of her, he could rape her, he could do anything to her. You know what animals they are, Mr. Turnage."

"That's the Bible's truth."

Amity touched Turnage's knee again. She managed a little snuffle and wiped her eye.

"I'd give anything to see my sister married, Mr. Turnage. I'd *do* anything. She's nice looking, she'll have money, she'd enjoy being married once she got over being frightened of the idea. Don't you think she'd make some man a good wife, Mr. Turnage?"

"I imagine she'd make a fine wife, ma'am."

Amity knew the dream. She had seen it in Turnage's eyes, but until now she had had only contempt for it.

"I'll tell you the truth, Mr. Turnage, I wish she would marry some nice strong handsome man like you. Someone who would stay here and help us run Sabrehill, now that my papa is gone."

"Someone like me, ma'am?" The deep intake of the overseer's breath was audible. The dream was alive and breathing in the dark of the small porch.

"Someone like you, Mr. Turnage. But I just don't know how to make her do it."

She lied, and as always she lied well. She did know, and over the next half-hour she led the overseer to find the answer to the problem and to agree to it. Like her, he was absolutely convinced that it would work. What a fool, Amity thought, and how Lucy deserved him.

"There's just one other thing," Turnage said hesitantly as she was about to step off of the porch.

"What would that be?"

"It's about that girl Leila."

Somehow Amity knew what was coming. More than a few times she had seen the overseer's gaze following the black girl about the courtyard.

"Yes, Mr. Turnage?"

Turnage was awkward. "Well, ma'am, I heard that you told her to sleep out in the field quarters even though she works in the big house. Now, course I got nothing to do with house servants, but I'm in charge of the quarters . . . and . . . well . . ."

Amity laughed. "Why, Mr. Turnage, honey, are you interested in our little Leila?"

Turnage was embarrassed. She could almost feel his

blush in the dark. "Well, now, Miss Amity, I only meant—"

"Now, now, I know how you men are." She stepped back toward him and put a hand on his chest. She was so close her thigh touched briefly against his. "Mr. Turnage, honey," she said, "as far as I'm concerned, you can do anything you please with our little Leila. Long as she's not busy at work, just treat her like you would any other good-looking wench in the fields."

She whirled away from Turnage and all but ran back toward the big house. Her sense of power was overwhelming. Everything, everything would be hers.

It was best if she did not move. Then the pain, too, seemed to still itself rather than throbbing and moving through her body. It was like a warm glow—a long, steady ache in her broken arm, the swelling under her right eye, in her rib cage and legs.

She sat in the kitchen, hearing the murmur of voices without really listening to them. The incredible word was being passed that Miss Dulcy had black blood; even that her mother had been a slave. It was an insane rumor, of course, but the angry way in which Momma Lucinda tried to shut people up made it sound as if she thought it was true.

Momma announced that everyone had to leave: she was locking up the kitchen. Leila painfully raised herself out of her chair and left the kitchen by the door on the courtyard side. She did not see the overseer on his porch, but nevertheless she turned north toward the avenue of oaks, intending to take a roundabout way to the field quarters. She wanted to stay as far from Mr. Turnage as possible.

She hated the idea of sleeping in the field quarters, if only because they were so distant, and she looked wishfully at Jeb's cottage as she passed it. He had let her stay with him last night, but he had been adamant: one night only. Jeb could be so kind and so hard at the same time.

She was on the oak-lined road when she knew she was being followed.

She stopped; heard nothing. Continued and heard the scuffling of gravel behind her. Stopped again.

"Now, you know that ain't the way, Leila," the overseer's voice said out of the darkness behind her.

She wanted to weep. She hadn't the strength to cope with Turnage now. She hadn't the strength to run or to fight.

He took her elbow and almost gently turned her around. "Nice night, ain't it? All them stars and that full moon. Don't know when I last seen such a moon."

Still holding her elbow, he led her back along the road. She tried to resist, but he hardly seemed to notice.

"Heard you was gonna sleep out at the field quarters from now on. Seemed an awful shame, you having to go way out there. Thought it would be nicer for both of us if you stayed at my place for a while. How'd you like to do that, Leila?"

She fought back her tears, fearing they might give him a perverse satisfaction. "Let go of me," she said, speaking for the first time. "Please let go of me."

He grinned at her. "You know what I'm gonna do to you tonight, Leila?"

She didn't answer.

"I guess you know. I'm gonna do lots of things I been wanting to do for a long time."

"I'll tell Miss Amity."

His laugh was a short bark. "You do that. I been talking to Miss Amity myself. I got the idea that she might like to know."

So the betrayal had gone that far. Leila could hold back the tears no longer.

"Now, there ain't no need to cry." Turnage sounded pleased by her tears. "You just do like I say, and we'll have a fine time. But if you don't, I'll bust your goddam arm all over again. I'll bust them both."

Weeping, she allowed herself to be led toward the overseer's house. There was no point in resistance—it could only lead to pain. There was nothing she could do about the night to come, absolutely nothing.

Eight

Turnage looked at the naked girl who lay weeping on his bed. What cause did she have to cry, he thought bitterly. She was just a black bitch, and everyone knew how much they liked it, even when they did protest. *He* was the one who had waited all this time, the one who had hungered and dreamed. *He* was the one who had been betrayed.

Because she had been nothing. Nothing.

Naked himself, he walked about the room. He found a dusty cup and poured whiskey into it. Sipped. God, he thought, near tears, it seemed like whiskey was the only thing in the world you could count on, the only thing that didn't disappoint.

Women, they were all the same, all of them. Each one a broken promise. You got to needing one, you looked around, and you found something that looked good. You worked to get it—worked or just plain took it—and it turned out to be nothing at all. Even the whores, and he had had whores all the way from New Orleans to Charles-

ton. They might say they liked it, they might say you were wonderful, but they just rendered their service, and that was it. Afterwards you went away feeling empty and defeated. Until the next time you got the need. Then, once again, emptiness and defeat.

"You ain't nothing at all, you know that?" he said to the girl, his voice like a moan. "You walk around like you know you're the greatest there is, like you're God's own whore, and you're nothing. Just another leathery dried-up piece of tail, just another nigger bitch. You think you're so good, and you're as bad as any I've ever had."

He remembered the slave girl he had maimed in New Orleans. She had been younger than Leila, almost white, and too beautiful to be believed. His employers had planned to sell her at a high price as a fancy. She had resisted Turnage until he had threatened to kill her, then lain perfectly still until he was finished with her. He had been drunk, and so bitterly disappointed that he had taken a club and shattered one of her knees. He would have been jailed if he hadn't run for it. Because of that worthless bitch, he had lost his job.

He wandered into the front room and looked out the window at the houseboy's cottage. He wondered if other men found women such a disappointment, if Jeb, too, was frequently disappointed. Well, when he got through with Jeb, the nigger would never be disappointed again.

He returned to the bedroom and looked at the girl. Desire stirred. That was the way it was. No matter how much you were disappointed, you had to try again, try for something better, try for perfection. You forgot that the pursuit was futile, and you had to try.

He threw himself onto the girl. This time it was better, because he got a response from her: as he reached the end of it, he squeezed her splinted arm and made her scream.

It seemed to Lucy that with the death of her father the quality of life at Sabrehill immediately began to deteriorate. There were new problems, new tensions, new struggles. There had always been problems to cope with, of course, but she felt that the new ones might never have

occurred if her father had still been alive. She also had an uneasy feeling that they were building toward some unforeseen and terrible crescendo.

On the very morning after the funeral, Leila came to her in a thoroughly wretched and incoherent state. Lucy had heard that Leila had been badly hurt by her fall on the stairs—she had even heard that Amity had pushed the girl, though she had had no chance to investigate—but she had not realized how bad the damage had been. Limping, her left arm in a sling, her face bruised and swollen, she looked like a twelve-year-old who had been run down by galloping horses.

She reluctantly, fearfully, confirmed that Amity had indeed pushed her down the stairs. She also said that Amity had barred her from sleeping in the latter's room and had sent her to sleep in the field quarters. But, worst of all, Mr. Turnage had forced her to go to his house last night and, among other things, had raped her several times.

Lucy was furious. She was convinced that Turnage was quite capable of such behavior and indulged in it rather frequently, but she questioned Leila closely in order to be sure. Then she told Leila to move to the big-house quarters, where she would be closer to the mansion and farther from Mr. Turnage. If she had had a gun in her hand and Turnage had been in sight, she would have shot him.

Her Uncle Joel was not available. He was locked in his rooms and either drinking or asleep. And it was not until late the next afternoon that she managed to corner Mr. Turnage on the porch of his house.

Her fury was unabated. "Mr. Turnage, I am here to tell you that as long as you live and work on this plantation you will never, ever, ever again so much as touch another woman!"

Turnage looked stunned. "Ma'am, I—I don't know—I don't know what this is about—"

"You know perfectly well what it's about, Mr. Turnage. It's about that little girl you abused just two nights ago and all the women on this plantation you have abused, and if I ever get another complaint—"

"Who—who said that about me? Who said I done that?"

"You dragged Leila here—"

"I never dragged no Leila! Any female came here, she came of her own free will. Whoever says I forced her is a liar!"

"Don't you lie to me, I know the truth when I hear it!"

"You gonna take the word of that little nigger whore over the word of a white man?"

"Mr. Turnage, I would take the word of *any* nigger whore over yours!"

Lucy whirled away with the grim satisfaction that she had gone too far—or rather far enough. Because if Mr. Turnage was any kind of a man he would be forced to demand an apology or turn in his resignation, and she had no intention of apologizing. Unfortunately, she was certain that he was no kind of a man.

The next day Uncle Joel appeared, red-eyed, out of his rooms. Another day, another incident. He had Lucy summoned to the office. He looked as if he had aged ten years.

"Lucy," he said, squinting at her, "Mr. Turnage just told me that you talked mighty unkindly to him."

"Where is Mr. Turnage?" Lucy asked grimly. "I would like to elaborate on my unkind statements."

"Now, Lucy, honey, you can't talk to Mr. Turnage that way—"

"Oh, can't I! Uncle Joel, I must insist that you discharge him at once."

Uncle Joel was shocked. "*You* must insist that *I—discharge—*"

"Do you know what he did?"

"Lucy, honey, we're right in the middle of the summer growing season—"

"He assaulted Leila. He tortured her. He performed unspeakable acts."

"Oh, come on, now, Lucy. You telling me that little fancy piece ain't never been spread before? Honestly, even for a lady, you are the most innocent—! Anything he gave her, she most likely asked for."

"She did not ask to be raped! I've never much cared for Leila, but I will not have her abused, and I want that man off this plantation."

"No! You want to, we'll talk about it when his contract is near up, but right now we got crops to raise, and my brother ain't here to help, and . . . and . . . my brother . . ."

Tears came to Uncle Joel's eyes, and he sank into his chair. Lucy left him with his sorrow.

The next afternoon Amity confronted her in the pantry. She appeared to be on the verge of throwing all the china to the floor.

"How dare you countermand my orders to Leila!"

For a moment Lucy had no idea of what she was talking about. "You mean having her sleep in the house quarters?"

"You know that's what I mean, God damn you! I told her she was to sleep in the field quarters, and I meant it. She's mine, and she'll do as *I* say!"

"Now, listen, you!" Seldom did Lucy display such temper as she had with Turnage, but she felt herself on the verge of doing so again. She stepped toward Amity with a raised fist and a hard jaw. "I have had about enough of your temper. I have had about enough of your selfishness. You told me you wanted that girl better trained to house chores, and she's going to be trained. And *I* want her in quarters close to the house. *I* want her just as far from Mr. Turnage as possible. Do you understand me?"

That girl stays where she is!"

To her surprise, Amity did not attack again. She stared at Lucy, and her eyes became speculative. After a few seconds, she grinned.

"All right," she said, "I guess it makes sense for Leila to be in the house quarters. She can stay. It's just that she's always been my personal servant, and I like to be consulted."

Each day another incident, another unraveling of the fabric, another deterioration. But the most disturbing incident occurred one afternoon more than a week after the funeral. Lucy found Dulcy cleaning up one of the guest

houses out by the west gardens and moving her personal possessions into it.

"But why," she asked in bewilderment. "Why?", though in some corner of her heart she knew very well why.

"Isn't it obvious? To get just as far from Miss Amity Sabre as I can get!" Dulcy was busily making the bed, and each tense movement expressed her anger. Her voice, the northern accent now almost gone, had a hard bitterness Lucy had never heard in it before.

"But to leave your own room, the room you've lived in all your life—"

"Lucy, I didn't live in that room for three years, and I certainly don't mind leaving it now. You know I only came back here to see you and Papa, and now Papa is gone." Dulcy sat down on the bed. Her voice was strong, but Lucy saw a glint of fear in her eyes.

"Papa's dying changes everything, doesn't it, Lucy?" she said. "I always knew that if the truth about me got out, I'd probably have to go up north. Thought I'd have one last summer here with you and Papa and then go back up north and be free. Whatever *that* means. Papa said I'd always have a share of Sabrehill in income, or at least as long as I needed it. But that's not going to happen, is it? Amity is going to see that it doesn't."

"Now, I wouldn't worry about that."

"You would if you were me."

Lucy sat down by Dulcy and put her arms around the younger girl. "Dulcy, come back into the house."

"No. You can see what Amity's trying to do to me. More and more, she orders me around like a servant."

"She orders everyone around."

"Not like me. She wants me to know I'm a nigger."

The word hung suspended in the air before them.

"Lucy, Papa always told me there was no shame in having black blood. He said there was even reason to be proud. But how can you be proud of something you have to keep secret . . . for fear of the shame?"

Lucy held her sister tighter. "Dulcy, don't be ashamed."

"I never wanted to be. I guess that's why I kept on playing with Irish and Vidette and the others even when

people said I was getting too old for that. I wanted to know that part of myself. Saturday evenings, Irish and I would go out to the field quarters. They liked me out there, they really did. They taught me to dance and pat juba—by the time we were fourteen, Irish and I could pat juba better than anyone else our age.” She smiled and demonstrated for Lucy: the complex knee-slapping, hand-clapping, finger-snapping rhythms that were juba.

The smile faded. The juba slowed and stopped.

“Lucy, what’s going to happen to me, now that Papa’s dead?”

Lucy tried to be reassuring, but she had no real answer. The next day she tried to talk to her Uncle Joel about Dulcy, but he was evasive. That was the result of Amity’s influence, she decided. Their talk about Jeb was much more satisfactory.

Jeb waited to see if Miss Lucy would visit him.

It had become a habit, this short wait each evening immediately after he returned to his cottage. If Miss Lucy did not appear in the first few minutes, she would not appear at all, and the rest of the night would be his. If she did appear, she usually had a book in hand, perhaps one she knew he had read, and she would want his opinion on a passage. Her interest was always genuine, and he enjoyed the quickness of her mind. And somehow the long deep hatreds were forgotten for a time, as he became the philosopher, the pedagogue, the friend.

On this evening she brought no book. She all but flew through his open door and flung it closed behind her. She was smiling widely, her blue eyes sparkled, and her face looked flushed and feverish in his lamplight.

“I have news for you, Jebediah, very special tidings, and I’ve been waiting all day to be alone with you. But first of all, do you have any of that excellent brandy left? I’d like some to settle my nerves.”

“I do indeed, Miss Lucy.”

Miss Lucy settled herself on a chair while Jeb poured two glasses of brandy. They now drank together, and Jeb had ceased worrying about being alone with her.

She accepted the drink, inhaled its bouquet, sipped it.

Licked her lips in an unladylike fashion. "I must say, Mr. Hayes, you may be a thief, but you steal only the best."

Jeb laughed. He sat down facing Miss Lucy. "And now, ma'am, what are these tidings?"

"First of all, I must tell you that I have persuaded my uncle that, because you do your work so well, you should not be called the houseboy. From now on, you are the butler, and eventually you'll be called the majordomo, because that sounds even more grand and glorious. Now, I know this means little to you, Jebediah. I can see that you are unimpressed."

"Not at all. I'm pleased."

"Don't fib. You are unimpressed. But, you see, the titles are merely an excuse for me to pay you a little more money than I otherwise could."

"Money?" Jeb looked at her without comprehension.

"So that you can buy your way free."

It was hardly unheard of for a slave to buy his freedom, but the mood of the white Southerner was rapidly hardening against the practice. Jeb knew: he heard the talk of Sabrehill's visitors. It was intelligent freed blacks like Denmark Vesey—men like Jebediah Hayes—who most brought the terror of insurrection to South Carolina. And yet Miss Lucy was raising the possibility.

It made Jeb angry. No matter what Miss Lucy said, the dream was too remote. He had dreamed only of escape, of running and fighting his way free, and quite likely dying in the attempt. Never of this.

"You shouldn't say that, Miss Lucy."

"But why not?"

"Because it can't happen. It can't ever happen."

Miss Lucy seemed to understand. "Listen to me, Jeb," she said gently. "It can happen. It has happened in the past here at Sabrehill. Now, I don't say it will happen overnight—it will probably take several years. But it can happen."

He nodded. He had to listen, at least. "All right," he said, "tell me."

"I spoke to Mr. Joel. He has agreed that, because your work is so superior, you shall be given a small wage. We haven't determined how much as yet, but it will be as

substantial as I can manage. The money will be saved for you. Moreover, extra servant help is frequently needed by our neighbors on social occasions, and we'll arrange for you to hire out as long as it doesn't interfere with your work at Sabrehill. I'm sure I can find you a great deal of extra work, Jebediah, and you'll be allowed to keep whatever you earn."

"And Mr. Joel has actually agreed to this?" Jeb could hardly believe such a thing. Joel Sabre was not an unkind man, but from what Jeb had seen of him, his views on slavery were stubbornly traditional and conservative.

"I reminded him that it was what my papa would have wanted. Papa hated to see intelligence wasted. We had our own school for the children, Jebediah, until the parish forced us to close it."

What Miss Lucy was telling him was too overwhelming to be accepted all at once. Jeb had nursed his rebelliousness and his hatreds for too long not to cling to them. But Miss Lucy had broken through his protective barriers. She was the one person to whom he had confided his past history. And gradually, as they talked, Jeb began to accept the fact that this *might* happen; he actually *might* be allowed to purchase his freedom. And in that case there would no longer be any need to find maps, any need to dare the patrols and the dogs and the dangers of the fields and swamps. One day he would be allowed to walk away from Sabrehill, unpursued and free. And meanwhile he could continue to live comfortably at Sabrehill, use the Sabrehill library, and make good talk with his friend, Miss Lucy.

Because she was his friend. He had to admit that now, had to believe it.

"All my uncle is asking," Miss Lucy said, "is return of the price paid for you, and you know that was very low. You're more than earning your keep, so a wage is only fair. It shouldn't take long, Jebediah, not so very long, and after that . . ."

They talked of what he might do. She would send him to her father's friends in the North. They would see that he found work and received further education. Perhaps he would teach or read law. People in the North

would want to know of his life as a slave: perhaps, like other ex-slaves, he would lecture or write. "But please don't expect me to become anti-abolitionist, Miss Lucy, or to preach state's rights or the Nullification Doctrine."

"Oh, ungrateful servant," Miss Lucy laughed. "Just don't tell Uncle Joel!"

Her smile faded and became wistful when she rose to leave. "And now I'll admit something, Jebediah. I shall be sorry to see you gain your freedom. I shall weep when you leave Sabrehill."

"Weep, Miss Lucy?"

She nodded. "When that poor weary runaway field hand came to the big house a few weeks ago, how did I know he would be the only man, aside from my father, I could talk to?"

He knew what she meant, and he felt deeply sad for her. "The only man, Miss Lucy? Surely, Mr. Paul . . ."

"I'm fond of Mr. Paul; he's very amusing when he wishes to be. But what does he know of the shadows in Plato's cave?"

She was standing close to him, and she rose up on her toes to kiss his cheek. It was the first time he had been kissed by a white woman since he had left the Pinkham plantation. On that day, Mrs. Pinkham had kissed his cheek, and Mr. Pinkham had shaken his hand. Later he had thought he would kill any white person who would dare such a thing again. But now he felt only affection and a harmless tremor of desire. He touched her shoulder and said, "Good night, Miss Lucy."

When she had left, he blew out the light in the front room and went into the bedroom. As he did each evening, he took off all of his clothes and washed thoroughly. It was a slow luxurious ritual, reminding him of how far he was from the fields and the whips, and tonight it was especially good. He felt reborn and oddly light.

Perhaps I really am going to be free at last, he thought. Maybe it can really happen.

He looked down at his naked body. On the front, only a few scars were apparent. He thought of the blacks he had known whose bodies were warped by disease, whose teeth rotted painfully out, who were wasted away by bad food

and overwork. He, on the other hand, in spite of all his trials was still strong and healthy. He was desired by women and could give pleasure. Tonight he felt like the most fortunate of men.

Teased by another tremor of desire, he thought of seeking out Vidette or Genevra or another. He would have liked to give pleasure as well as receive it. But tonight was not the night for that. Tonight he would lie alone and think of how his world was changing. He would no longer review the hatreds and injustices of the past. He would dream of the future that might be.

He put out the light and climbed into his bed.

From her window, Amity watched Lucy return to the big house from Jebediah's cottage. First Leila, she thought, and now Lucy. Lucy, night after night. A wave of self-righteousness swept over her. When you got right down to it, the accusations she was about to make might very well be true, even if she did plan to make certain exaggerations. Yes, she was really quite justified in bringing this matter to Uncle Joel's attention.

Tonight was the night. She could feel that the time was right. The light was still on in the office, and Mr. Turnage was sitting on his porch. Mr. Turnage was waiting.

Amity waited until she heard Lucy's bedroom door closing. She had no wish to meet her older sister on the stairs or in the hall. She then pulled on a robe and stepped into slippers and hurried downstairs and out to the office.

Uncle Joel spent almost every evening now idling in the office and sipping whiskey, and Amity saw at once that he was well into the jug. That was all to the good; that served Amity's purposes.

She sank into a chair facing him and let him see the deep concern on her face. "Uncle Joel, I hate to disturb you at this hour, but there's something been going on, and after tonight, I just can't hold my peace no longer."

Joel Sabre's heavy whiskey-reddened face reflected her concern. "Well, what is it, Amity, honey?"

She half-covered her face with a hand. "I hardly know how to tell you. It's been worrying me sick."

"Then I think you'd better tell me."

"It's about Lucy."

"She giving you difficulties, honey?"

Amity shook her head. "No, no, it's not that at all. Uncle Joel, it's—it's old-maid trouble."

Uncle Joel looked puzzled. "Don't think I quite follow you, honey."

"What I'm trying to say, Uncle Joel, is that we better get her married off and do it fast."

"You mean her and Paul Devereau been—"

"No." Amity shook her head again. She tried to look faint. "No, Uncle Joel, as far as I know her and Paul Devereau ain't been up to nothing. Would to God they had been. But Lucy just ain't . . . well, she just ain't attracted to Paul, and the way things are now, I certainly wouldn't wish her onto him. Now, I know it's a shame to say such a thing about your own sister, but it's true. Uncle Joel, our Lucy is no longer the woman for Mr. Paul."

"Now, wait a minute, wait a minute." Uncle Joel looked confused. "I don't follow this. You say Lucy got old-maid trouble. Now, just what do you mean?"

Amity hesitated, bit her lip. "How old is Lucy?" she asked. "About twenty-nine?"

"'Bout that."

"And what happens to some women when they reach that age and they ain't got no man of their own? Then they meet some big strong good-looking buck like Jebediah. And they don't mean nothing, but they spend more and more time with this big buck—"

The red of Joel's face deepened. "Now wait a minute again, little lady. Are you trying to tell me—"

"I make no accusations, Uncle Joel. I only know what I've seen, and that's all I can tell you."

Joel Sabre hunched forward in his chair. "All right, tell me."

"All I know is that a while back Lucy started visiting Jeb's cottage in the evening. She'd stay there a while and come back. I never thought much about it. She's always talking about how smart he is, how educated—"

"I know that. Go on."

"But it seemed to me that she was going more and more

often and staying longer and longer, and I began to get worried."

"Well, I should think so. That ain't proper. So what happened?"

Amity gave her hands a futile wave. "Why, that's just about all, Uncle Joel, except that it's got so that some nights she stays out there for hours. I got so worried, Uncle Joel, that I finally started making a list of dates when she visited Jeb. Even if I didn't see her go out there, if she wasn't in her room at night, I'd stay awake and watch for her return. And, Uncle Joel, sometimes I was up half the night."

"You got that list with you?"

Amity took the folded piece of paper from her robe pocket. She held it out to her Uncle Joel, who almost fearfully unfolded it. As he looked at it, his face became drawn.

"You mean to tell me sometimes she's been out there until three o'clock in the morning?"

Amity closed her eyes wearily and nodded. "Sometimes she's kept me up most of the night waiting for her. Of course, I know they like to talk about books and such, and I'm not saying they were actually *doing* anything—"

"Honey child, when a grown woman and a buck male spend practically the whole night together, they are *doing* something."

Uncle Joel stood up and paced. He shook his head worriedly, ran his fingers through his hair. He shook the list at Amity. "Anybody else know about this? Dulcy or anybody?"

Amity shook her head. "Just Mr. Turnage. He could hardly miss noticing, sitting there on his porch the way he does. But of course he can hardly stay up to see how late it is when she goes back to the big house. I think he's got a good idea of what's going on, but he ain't saying—"

"He goddam well better not!"

"He just says he wishes Lucy wouldn't coddle the niggers so much, because it makes his work harder in the fields."

"And she does coddle them, he's right about that!"

Amity could see Joel Sabre's rage growing. "Coddling this one right into bed. What do you think we should do about it?"

"What we should do about *him* is man's work, Uncle Joel. What we should do about *her* is get her married off right quick. Why, she could have a pickaninny on the way right now."

"I'd kill it!"

"Best thing is to tumble her into bed with a white man just as quick as possible."

Joel Sabre paced and thought. His breathing was becoming increasingly ragged, and he viciously kicked a chair out of his way. He appeared on the verge of explosion.

"Paul Devereau," he said.

"No, I said we can't wish her on him now. Besides," she added slowly, "the way things are now, I just might get interested in Mr. Paul myself."

Joel Sabre gave her a sharp look. "Then who?"

"Why . . ." Amity shrugged. "Why not Mr. Turnage?"

"He'd have her? Knowing what she does?"

"Uncle Joel, honey," Amity said wisely, "you just give our Mr. Turnage a real good bonus, a raise in pay, and a long-term contract and watch him jump at it. Just don't mention nothing about maybe cutting down on Lucy's inheritance. I happen to know that Mr. Turnage admires our Lucy whether she's been hopping into a nigger's bed or not."

Joel Sabre stopped pacing. He went to the door and looked toward the big house. When he said, "That bitch," his voice was shaking. *My God*, Amity thought, with a shiver of delight, *he might have her whipped! He'd have to do it himself! He might kill her!*

"Amity, honey, I got to find out. I got to ask her."

"She'll lie."

"No, she won't. Her body don't lie. Either she still got it or she don't."

Amity realized what her uncle had in mind. She had almost expected it.

"Uncle Joel, I don't want to get into something it ain't ladylike to discuss, but I understand from Leila that there's ways of pleasuring without . . . well, you know. So even if she is still a virgin—"

"If she ain't got her maidenhead," Uncle Joel said flatly, "that'll prove something."

As a woman, and one who had learned quite a lot from her black companion, Amity knew that the lack of a hymen would not really prove anything at all. Men, it seemed, were strangely ignorant in these matters. But this was no time to be enlightening Uncle Joel.

"All right," she said. "Let's ask her."

Amity quietly closed the library doors. Uncle Joel poured brandy from a decanter and bolted it down as if it were water. His face was bathed with sweat, Amity noted, and his eyes had a wild look in them. Lucy appeared bewildered and a little frightened, and Amity had to suppress a smile.

"Did Amity tell you why I asked for you to come down here?"

"No, Uncle Joel, she did not."

"You got no idea?"

"No, Uncle Joel, I don't. What is—"

"What it is, is that I think you're a goddam hypocritical liar."

Lucy's eyes widened and glazed. "I think I shall return to my room. You've obviously been drinking a great deal."

Uncle Joel's hand shot out and grabbed Lucy's wrist. "You never mind what I drink. You ain't going nowhere till I'm done with you. You're gonna answer some questions."

Lucy stared. She did not move. "Very well," she said. "Ask your questions. Will you please release my wrist first?"

Uncle Joel's fingers slowly opened, as if he had to force them apart. Lucy pulled her wrist away and rubbed it with her other hand.

"Now, you tell me the truth, girl," Uncle Joel said. "You tell me what that nigger really means to you."

"If you mean Jebediah—"

"You know goddam well who I mean."

"I've told you what he means to me. He has a fine mind that's being wasted—"

"A fine mind!" Joel said to Amity. "His mind is what she's interested in!"

Amity kept her face carefully blank. Lucy paled.

"Uncle Joel," she said carefully, "I think you had better tell me exactly what has disturbed you."

"That is what disturbed me."

Uncle Joel handed the folded piece of paper to her. Frowning, Lucy unfolded it and looked at it. She shook her head.

"I don't understand."

"Dates and times. Look at them."

Lucy looked at the paper again. After a moment she looked questioningly at Amity.

"This is your handwriting."

"Some of the more recent dates that you've visited Jebediah in his cottage," Amity said. "I don't have the exact hour for each time you went out there, but I do have the hours that you came back."

Lucy looked at the paper a third time, comprehension spreading over her face—comprehension and horror. Amity watched with amazed delight. Never before in her life had she seen Lucy with such an expression on her face.

But then the expression began to change.

"Why you . . . wretched . . . scheming, lying . . ."

Lucy began to shake. Her face became twisted and almost witchlike. ". . . filthy, scheming, vicious . . ." She ripped the paper to shreds and flung the pieces to the floor. Amity had seen her angry before but never like this.

"You saying that paper ain't true?" Uncle Joel asked.

"True? Of course it's not true! And you dare call me a hypocritical liar!"

"You saying you never went out to Jeb's cottage?"

"Yes, I've gone out to Jebediah's cottage. I've been there many times. I told you that this morning. I've been to the gardener's cottage and the carpenter's shop and the

mansion quarters, too, but my God, I never slept with any of them! Uncle Joel, how could you possibly believe—”

“Maybe she’s telling the truth,” Amity said quickly. “Maybe absolutely nothing happened out there in Jebediah’s cabin, nothing at all. Lucy can at least show us that there’s some doubt.”

Lucy turned terrible eyes on her. She seemed to be staring at an evil she had never before known to exist.

“Yes, that’s right,” Uncle Joel said. “That’s what we’re here for. You can show us, Lucy.”

“What do you mean?”

“Momma Lucinda could look at her,” Uncle Joel said to Amity.

“No. Momma Lucinda would lie for her.”

“What do you mean?”

“Who, then?”

Amity pretended to consider. “Well . . . we could send for the doctor.”

“Don’t want to wait for no doctor. Don’t need no doctor for this anyway.”

“We could get two or three women from the house quarters. Get two or three of them, and they wouldn’t dare lie.”

Lucy was beginning to understand. “My God, I don’t believe this is happening! Are you suggesting that I—that I be examined!”

“Will you agree to that?” Joel Sabre asked.

Lucy drew herself up to her full height. The anger and resentment deserted her face. For the first time since she had entered the library she appeared perfectly calm.

“No,” she said, “I will not.”

Amity shrugged. “There you are.”

But Lucy was not finished. “Now, you listen to me, Uncle Joel—”

“I don’t think there’s anything more to be said.”

“I have heard your accusation, and you are going to listen to me.” The initial shock was gone, and Lucy’s voice was hard and cold: it commanded, and Joel Sabre stood listening. “Uncle Joel, you have known me all my life. As your niece and housekeeper, I have served you well.

I don't think you can deny that I have always honored and respected you, and I think you know that in my entire life I have never lied to you. Is that not true?"

For an instant Uncle Joel seemed at a loss for an answer, but he resentfully admitted, "I never said it wasn't."

"Then hear what I'm saying to you. I am telling you here and now, I am giving you my word as a lady and a Sabre, that never have I had intimate relations with Jebediah Hayes." Lucy's voice took on an edge that Amity had never heard before. "And I think you would agree with my father, sir, that *a gentleman must always take the word of a lady.*"

Uncle Joel's eyes, hard on Lucy's until that moment, wavered. For the first time since he had read Amity's list of supposed assignations, he seemed shaken and uncertain, and Amity realized that she could still lose this battle. She had to do something and quickly—she certainly had no intention of losing the stakes on the mere "word of a lady."

"And what about *my* word?" she asked harshly. "Are you saying I lied about you visiting Jebediah until three o'clock in the morning?"

"I am saying nothing on that point. I shall refrain from calling you a liar, even if you are. I merely deny the inference that I have been intimate with Jebediah Hayes."

"Then prove it! Prove you haven't—"

"I don't have to prove it."

"Why not? What makes you so good? What makes you such a lady when you been with Jebediah until three in the morning—"

"I have not!"

"Then you *are* calling me a liar! You *are* saying I'm less a lady than you!" Amity found herself fighting desperately, saying anything that came to mind. "Well, let me tell you this, Lucy Sabre. *I'm* not ashamed to prove that I'm a virgin! I'm willing to go into the downstairs bed chamber with you right this minute and *show* you I'm a virgin. I'll let you look, and I'll trust you to tell the truth to Uncle Joel. Are you willing to do the same?"

Lucy hesitated. "I have already given my word."

"Are you willing?" Amity saw a ray of hope.

"No, I am not."

"Why not? What makes you so afraid?"

"I'm not afraid, but—"

"But you just don't want us to find out that your little old maidenhead ain't intact, ain't that right?" The words came out of her mouth like a revelation, stunning her. The moment she said them, she knew that victory was at hand.

"Lucy, are you willing to swear that you've got a maidenhead?"

"I've told you, Jebediah and I—"

"Never mind Jebediah and you," Amity mocked. "I'm saying nothing on that point. Are you willing to swear *on your word as a lady* that you've got a maidenhead?"

Lucy looked stunned. *I've got you*, Amity thought, *God damn you, I've got you!*

"Well, what about it," she said carelessly. "You got it or not? And if you haven't got it, who'd you lose it to? If not Jebediah, then who? To Irish, maybe? Uncle Joel, you know how she's always sniffing around the niggers, playing like she's their white momma or something. There's no telling how many little nigger boys she's played her old-maid games with. Now, I'm not saying it's altogether her fault. We all know how these things happen, and naturally when she met a big handsome buck stud like Jebediah . . ."

That finished it. Lucy had fought her fight, and she could fight no more. She crumpled. Her hands went to her mouth, but could not hold back the pained cry, and Amity felt a thrill of delight, a fascination in watching the agony. Lucy moaned, "I didn't, I didn't," and ran from the room.

Amity crossed her arms over her breasts and sighed. She looked at her uncle and smiled. "Well, I guess we found out what we wanted to know," she said.

"Yes," he said, "we found out. And now I've got some heavy work to do."

"Mr. Turnage, it's late, and you and me got things to do yet tonight, and I'm not going to waste a lot of words.

You know that I got an old-maid niece that spends too damn much time with the niggers."

Never before had Amity seen her uncle in quite this mood. If he had been in a temper, her father had always been present to calm him and bring him back to reason. Now there was no one and nothing to hold him in check.

She stood in a shadowed corner, watching. In the lamp-light her uncle's face was shiny and rocklike, and the wildness was still in his eyes. Mr. Turnage, sitting before him, was flustered and excited. Tonight, he no doubt thought, could be the making of his fortune.

"Well, sir," he said, "I know she sorta spoils 'em."

"Spends too much time with them, spends too much time with that damn Jebediah Hayes. You've seen her going out to his cottage?"

"Ah, well . . ." Turnage was uncertain of the safest answer. "I don't think she means anything."

"Course she don't. But some niggers do."

Turnage nodded. "Yes, sir, some of 'em can't hardly keep their hands off of a white woman."

"Well, we got a dangerous nigger, Mr. Turnage, and we got to do something about him. We got to do something before he makes trouble for a white woman. But . . ." Uncle Joel leaned forward toward Turnage, and his eyes were hard. "If you think that Miss Lucy, with her soft heart, ever done anything wrong with a nigger, I want you off this plantation by sun-up. And if I ever hear that you said one bad word about Miss Lucy or any of my nieces, I'll come after you, and I'll find you, and by God I'll kill you."

He said it flatly, and Amity knew he meant it. And so did Turnage.

"Mr. Joel, sir, I'll never in the world have one bad thing to say against Miss Lucy or any of your ladies. Now, we been like friends since I came here, and you must know that that's the God's own truth."

Uncle Joel sat back in his chair. "Yes, Mr. Turnage, that's right. We been real good friends. Hunted and drank and gambled together. Maybe like Aaron said you're a might fast with the whip, but like we always told him,

you're fast with the profit, too. Otherwise, maybe I wouldn't be about to put a certain proposition to you."

"And what's that, sir?" Turnage asked, pleased.

"I understand that you admire Miss Lucy."

"Why, yes, sir."

"Then marry her."

"Now, she's a nice-looking lady, Mr. Turnage," Amity cut in quickly, as if they hadn't discussed this matter before, "and there'll be a nice dowry, and you'll be just like a member of the family."

"Amity, leave this to me," Uncle Joel said. "What about it, Mr. Turnage?"

"Do you think she'll be willing to marry me?"

"She'll be willing," Uncle Joel said grimly.

"And how will I fit into Sabrehill after that?"

"Why, you'll fit in just fine. Miss Lucy's got some money coming, and you'll get, say, five thousand of it right away. You'll get a pay increase—twenty-five percent."

Turnage looked disappointed. He had expected more. So had Amity, for that matter.

"What else?" he asked. "I stay on here permanent?"

Uncle Joel hesitated. "A five-year contract with regular increases. It'll be renewed if you do as good as you have in the past. You'll go on running the place with me, and Miss Lucy will live with you in your house but take care of the big house just like she's always done."

Turnage chewed his mustache for a moment. "Ten-year contract," he said, "and ten thousand dollars."

Uncle Joel's face darkened and he half-rose out of his chair. "In case I gave you the wrong impression, sir, I ain't paying you to marry my niece. It happens to be a privilege."

"Now, Mr. Joel, a man's got to look out for himself!"

"Of course you do!" Amity charged quickly forward. "Uncle Joel, Mr. Turnage has to provide for his future—and for his *bride's* future. He'll have to think of Lucy now! And, Mr. Turnage, I do believe the thing you're forgetting is that you'll be," she said the words very carefully, "a member of the family. One step at a time, Mr. Turnage. It's gonna work out just fine for all of us."

Turnage stared at her.

She nodded to him very slowly.

"All right," Turnage said. "All right. If Miss Lucy agrees to have me . . . I'll be happy to become her husband."

He and Uncle Joel stood and shook hands.

"And now you and me got something we got to do, Mr. Turnage, and I think you know what it is. It's something I never done before and never wanted to do, but I'm gonna do it now. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Turnage said. His eyes shone and he held back a grin.

"Go get Cheney and a couple of others you can count on. Tell them we damn well better be able to count on them if they know what's good for them."

"Yes, sir. Won't take a minute."

Turnage left the office. Uncle Joel opened a desk drawer and took out a stone and a knife with an eight-inch blade.

"Amity, honey," he said, "something I don't like to think about is gonna happen, and I don't want you to be here. I think you better go back to the house."

"I'll wait here," she said.

"Best you went back to your room and hid your head under a pillow."

"No. You may need me. Afterwards."

He nodded and began whetting the knife.

He's gonna do it, she thought, he's actually gonna do it. The anger that had fired him when she first told him about Lucy and Jebediah had not burned out in the slightest. Or perhaps the anger had been there long before she had spoken to him that evening, but all those years her father had been nearby to keep the fires banked.

The blade made rhythmic whetting sounds against the stone.

"Uncle Joel," she said, "there's just one thing I want to ask you, and I want to ask you in plain, blunt language, because it's important."

Uncle Joel did not look up from the blade and the stone.

"What is it?"

"Just this. Is the future master of Sabrehill gonna be

the son of a nigger-rutting woman and the kind of white trash that would marry her?"

"Christ, no," Uncle Joel said.

Then I've beaten them, Amity thought. She had to turn away from her Uncle Joel to hide the glow of triumph which showed on her face. First Dulcy, and now Lucy. They would get nothing—oh, a few dollars perhaps, but nothing more. Not Sabrehill. *Sabrehill*, she thought, *is mine now! It's all mine!*

Nine

He was just drifting off to sleep when they came, and from the first hard boot-step he knew that the nightmare had begun again. Or that it had never really ended.

He had not drawn in the latch string, and there was no need to break in the door. The boots pounded, and he was instantly awake and out of the bed. He saw the first one, no more than a shadow, coming through the doorway, and he threw a fist with all his strength at the head. The man jolted back, crying out, and two more shadows rushed at him.

"Grab him! Get the son-of-a-bitch!"

It was the overseer's voice, and Jeb had the odd sensation that the past few weeks had vanished. He might as well have been back on the Wingate plantation, cornered between the coachhouse and the barn. Nothing that had happened since then counted. Nothing had changed.

"Grab him! Get the son-of-a-bitch!"

The drivers knew what they were doing. They grabbed both of his arms. Before he could throw them off, one of

them brought a boot down hard along his left shin, slamming a heel into his bare foot, and another kicked him in the right knee. He screamed and fell forward onto his knees, and something—a fist—pounded the back of his head repeatedly until consciousness began to fade.

Once again, as on the Wingate plantation, he was lifted by the arms . . . lifted and dragged . . . dragged through darkness.

“Get him on out here! Come on now!”

The tops of his feet thumped down the steps of his cottage, the left one painfully, and the pain helped to revive him. He felt himself being dragged toward the courtyard. He was to be whipped, to be whipped brutally, perhaps time and again, and he had no idea why. He only knew that that was what always happened when you were dragged from your bed in the night. And he could not endure the thought of such a whipping. He would never be able to live through such a whipping again.

His feet dragged over gravel and then across grass: he was being dragged over the courtyard. The pain in his foot and knee made the effort almost impossible, but somehow he managed suddenly to get his feet under him, brace them, and stand erect. With one massive shrug, he threw off his captors.

“Take him to the barn,” Joel Sabre said. “We’ll do it out there.”

Then Jeb saw the flash of the blade in his hand, and he knew. This time it was to be more than a whipping. For years he had been waiting for this, fearing it, ever since the threat of another master. For years he had awakened sobbing from nightmares, and now the nightmare was coming true—that one most nightmarish part of the long nightmare that was his life.

In the few seconds that their hands were off of him, he looked around at his attackers. He could see them as clearly in the starlit courtyard as if it were day. There were four blacks around him, big men, all about to throw themselves on him. Three of them looked frightened but determined, while the fourth, Cheney, merely looked sick. There were two white men standing a dozen feet away:

Turnage and Mr. Joel. Turnage's face twisted with excitement. This was his revenge, revenge on Jeb for beating Cheney, for taking Leila, for being alive. Near him stood Mr. Joel, his face ugly with fury, a fury that matched any that Jeb had ever felt.

But why?

Jeb knew why at once, knew instinctively. The knife itself told him. He had gotten too close to a white woman. Too close even at civilized Sabrehill. Too close to Miss Lucy Sabre, and Joel Sabre thought that his white niece had been seduced, raped, defiled.

The bitterness of it overwhelmed him. He had been taken out of the fields—for this. He had been soothed and befriended—for this. He had been given a new dream of freedom—for this.

Bitterness and terror and hatred—they became the same, and all of the old madness welled up. A driver came at him from the left, and with a cry he threw a backhand fist that might have taken a smaller man's head off. The man's head twisted grotesquely, his legs lifted under him, and he fell rolling to the ground. Jeb was already throwing another backhand at the driver on his right.

He could not run, could hardly walk. He had to twist and stagger, striking out almost blindly. A bloody face loomed up, and he felt it cave in under his knuckles. A booted foot swung toward his left knee; he grabbed it and twisted it as far and as quickly as he could. He hardly knew if the scream was the other man's or his own. An arm came around his neck, and a fist thudded into his back, but he bit into the arm until it was pulled away. He staggered, fell forward, and a hard knee came up into his face, but he grabbed the leg and again twisted, throwing it. His fist jammed into a heavy chest, and he felt the ribs giving way. Someone grabbed his left wrist, and he brought a hand smashing down on a forearm, then shot the freed fist into a bleeding mouth.

"Get him, God damn you, get him!"

It was Joel Sabre, directly before him, knife flashing, and Jeb went for his neck with both hands. If ever he had gotten his fingers into that neck, he would never have

let go. They might have cut him up, castrated him, butchered him, but still he would have clung to that neck.

But they had his arms again then. Jeb was certain Joel Sabre was about to thrust the knife into his guts, and maybe he was. Jeb threw himself back, away from the white man. One of the drivers kicked him in the back of the right leg, and he felt himself going down.

"Hold him! Get him down! Spread his legs!"

He fell on his back, nearly losing his wind. An arm came around his neck, and this time he could not bite it. His head seemed to be resting on a driver's knee. He tried to kick out, but Turnage grabbed his left leg, Cheney his right. They raised the legs and spread them apart until he was staring at his own genitals.

Joel Sabre moved in between Turnage and Cheney. "All right, you black bastard," he said, going down on one knee. "We'll do it right here. You used these on a white woman, God damn you, and now you're gonna lose them."

With his left hand, he grasped Jeb painfully, but it wasn't the pain that made Jeb scream. It was terror and despair. It was going to happen to him, this thing that he had heard of and even seen happen to others. He had been threatened with it before, had waited in horror of it for years, and now it was going to happen.

No, not going to happen. Happening. For Joel Sabre was opening the skin.

"Jesus God, Mr. Joel," Cheney said, "don't do it!"

Somehow, with some ultimate exertion, Jeb ripped his sweat-slick left arm free. The knife blade bit into his fingers as he grabbed at it and pulled it away from his bleeding flesh. He released the blade and shoved his bloody hand into Joel Sabre's face, thrusting him away. Turnage said, "God damn you!" and pulled his left leg to one side until it seemed to be ripping from its socket. Jeb screamed again, and struck out again, as Joel Sabre returned with the red-edged knife, but his arm was recaptured. The hand clutched his genitals, and the blade came down.

It was only then that Jeb realized that he was not alone in his screaming. Behind Cheney's shoulder he saw Miss

Lucy. She raced forward to pull Joel Sabre away from him, but he merely rose to give her a backhand slap that nearly knocked her down, then knelt and grabbed Jeb again.

"Do you want everybody to know? Do you want everybody, everybody in the world, to know? For the love of God, Uncle Joel, do you want everybody to know?"

At first, Jeb did not even recognize Miss Dulcy's voice. Then he saw her face between his and Joel Sabre's, saw her hands fighting to get the blade away from the bloody furrow it had already cut.

"You get away from here, God damn you!"

"Uncle Joel, *think*, for God's sake! Do you want the Kimbroughs to know about Lucy? Do you want the Buckridges to know? Do you want the whole countryside to know about *your* niece?"

"I'm gonna cut this nigger—"

"The Sabre name, Uncle Joel, the Sabre name! Do you want to disgrace the Sabre name?"

"She already disgraced it, this here nigger disgraced it—"

"But nobody knows, Uncle Joel. Nobody knows! But if you do this to Jebediah, everybody will know, everybody will guess. There's only one reason anybody around here would do this to a black man, and people will say, was it with Dulcy he was doing it? Was it with Lucy? *Was it with Amity?* Uncle Joel, they'll know, and they'll say, *Was it with Amity?*"

"They wouldn't dare—"

"They'll dare, Uncle Joel. They'll know and they'll dare, and we'll be disgraced, Uncle Joel. We'll be disgraced!"

"I got to cut him!"

But Joel Sabre was already hesitating.

"Give me the knife, God damn it," Turnage said hoarsely. "I'll cut him for you, Mr. Joel. I'll cut him!"

"Uncle Joel, think of Amity, think of our name, think of what my papa would do! Would he do a thing like this?"

"I—I think he would."

"No, not this. He never would. You know he never—"

From somewhere, Miss Amity appeared, harpy-faced, to thrust Dulcy Sabre aside and screech, "*Cut him! Cut him!*"

"No, Uncle Joel, please—"

"Don't have to cut him," Turnage said. "I'll take care of him." He released Jeb's leg and shoved Joel Sabre aside. Then with all his strength he kicked Jeb between the legs.

Jeb felt as if his entire body were bursting, as if it were blowing up with one hideous pain that started at his crotch and expanded up through him. As he screamed, the heavy boot hit again and again.

"Don't have to cut him," he dimly heard Turnage say. "Ruin him just as good this way, and it'll hurt a hell of a lot more." The boot kept on coming, smashing at Jeb, seeming to tear him apart. "Hit him hard enough and often enough like this, and it kills the seed. Won't be no good for studding even if he can get it up."

Jeb fought to escape the boot. Cheney released his right leg, and he tried to twist, tried to scramble away. Bowels let go, and he began to vomit. Hands slipped away from him, and he struggled to his knees, but the boot heel slammed into his face, and he felt his nose crack and pulp. He was nothing but pain now, nothing but a mass of pain, screams ringing in his ears, ribs bending and cracking under the blows. Then the explosions between the legs again until his guts seemed to be flowing out of his mouth, strangling him.

He must have passed out. He felt water splash over him, found himself choking on blood. Water poured over him again, and he felt himself being lifted. His wrists were lashed together, and hands were tying them to a ring.

The whipping post. He could see nothing, either he was blind with pain or there was blood in his eyes, but he knew they must have carried him to the post.

"No more, Uncle Joel," he heard Miss Lucy wail. "No more, please!"

"God damn it, didn't I tell you to get back to the house and stay there?"

"Haven't you hurt him enough—"

"Woman, it's you I should be putting to the post. Now, you stand back from that nigger, or by God I'm gonna do it. Mr. Turnage, give me that whip. We'll take turns, and I'm going first. Is he conscious?"

"I'll find out."

A hand fumbled between Jeb's legs. When he screamed, the hand went away, and the whipping began.

He lived now in a dream-world of pain. Each stroke of the whip was like a colored light, a rocket in the night, a blazing, falling star. He was blackness, he was night, and the burning lights flamed—red, blue, yellow—through his darkness.

He seemed to float. The lights went out, and he was darkness in a warm dark sea. He wanted only to float in the darkness forever. This was a darkness beyond peace, a darkness that touched on death. If only they would let him, he would stay in this darkness forever.

But then a red light burned across his darkness, searing it, and the darkness screamed, and the lights began again.

Sometimes he found himself back in the world of the whip. He found his body writhing, twisting, grinding against the post, and he heard voices: "All right, you take the whip again, Mr. Turnage. And don't spare him one damn bit."

Once he found himself so twisted around that his back was to the post. Somewhere, at a distance, there was weeping. Opening his eyes, he found himself facing Turnage and Mr. Joel. They vanished as the whip cut across his face, and Mr. Joel said, "Careful of his eyes, damn it. Anything I don't need, it's a blind nigger." His consciousness faded again, as the overseer began working on his face with the loaded butt of the whip.

The sea was no longer warm and dark, it was bright with pain. As he floated in it, Momma Lucinda looked down at him and whispered, "Oh, my God, my God, what have they done to this boy!" Then he was at the post again, and Turnage, beating his genitals with the whip

handle, was saying, "You're finished with wenches, boy. You're finished for good!" and Jeb didn't know if it was happening or if he was remembering. All was a confusion of pain.

The confusion cleared. The whipping must have been over, at least for the night, because he was lying sprawled on his bed, and the light was very bright in his eyes. He was lying naked and bloody and smeared with his own filth, and Miss Amity was staring at him with a look of childish delight, and he didn't care. He might never care again.

There was a quarrel going on. Miss Lucy, sobbing, turned on Miss Amity, and Miss Amity screeched back. There was the sound of a slap, the sound of ripping cloth, and Miss Amity shouting profanities. Momma Lucinda ordered everyone out, and Miss Amity stamped indignantly away, but Miss Lucy and Miss Dulcy stayed.

"Dulcy-child, you get yourself out of here. This ain't no place for no young lady like you."

"No, Momma, I'm staying." Miss Dulcy's face glistened with tears, and her voice shook with anger. "I'm no baby, after tonight I'll never be a baby again. And I'm going to help care for Jebediah."

"Well . . . guess you're old enough to learn."

"Just tell me what to do."

"The first thing you've got to learn is how to clean him up and keep him that way. If this boy ain't kept real clean, he's gonna die. Irish! Fetch me some hot water from the kitchen."

He closed his eyes and drifted in the pain. The hands were gentle. They carefully washed the blood from his eyes, his nostrils, his mouth and ever so carefully pressed his loosened teeth back into place. He cried out only when they tried to remold his nose and the blood began to flow again.

"Jebediah . . . can you hear me? You got to tell me where the hurt is. Do it hurt here, Jebediah? Or here?"

It hurt everywhere. He could not answer. But when they touched his ribs, they knew. When they touched his foot, his knee, his bloody, aching genitals, they knew.

He drifted in and out of consciousness like something

floating through light and dark. He felt himself being turned by the gentle hands, turned and washed and bound up. When he opened his eyes, Miss Lucy and Miss Dulcy were gone, but Leila was there with Momma Lucinda. He closed his eyes, briefly it seemed to him, and when he looked again, Leila was gone but Miss Dulcy was back.

"You feeling any better, Jebediah?" she asked in a whisper. He couldn't answer, didn't want to try. "You just lie quietly, Jebediah. We'll take care of you. We'll take care of everything."

But he was beyond caring. He fell back into unconsciousness with the sure knowledge that he was at last defeated.

She didn't want to answer when the knock came at her door. She wanted only to throw herself onto her bed and lose herself in the deepest sleep. She wanted to forget, not even to dream, and to awaken to another world. She wanted it to be a world in which her father still lived and the people of Sabrehill were happy. There would be no threat of slave insurrections, no burnings in Charleston, no whippings, hangings, or mutilations, no death.

But when the knock came again, harder than before, she answered: "Who is it?"

"Your uncle."

His face, when she opened the door, was terrible. He looked older than ever before, the lines of his heavy face more deeply carved, the eyes dark and grim. His breath was thick with liquor, and he staggered slightly as he stepped into the room. He looked at her with such contempt mingled with disgust that for an instant she thought he was going to hit her.

"I never done nothing like that to a nigger before," he said. "Never in my life."

"I know."

"Never done it. Never wanted to do it. But I did it tonight. Because of you."

"Why because of me? Why did you have to—"

"You know why!" He raised a big hand, and again she thought he was going to hit her. "I did it because I had

to. Because of what you done with that nigger. I had to!"

She saw that there was no point in arguing with him. He was beyond argument, and he was dangerous. She covered her eyes. She wanted only to be left alone.

He yanked her hand away from her face. "You look at me when I'm talking to you. You hear me?"

"Yes, Uncle Joel."

He hung onto her wrist, gripping it painfully. "You know what the worst of it is? The worst of it is that that boy ain't even to blame the way you are. He's just a poor dumb nigger boy that got too close to a white woman who knew better. My God, I never dreamed that you had a weakness for black meat."

"Please, Uncle Joel!"

"Now, don't you go getting all delicate on me. You lost that privilege. Listen to me, lady—we *know what you do*. We know you do things with niggers that a white woman shouldn't do, and for that, you deserve whipping even more than the boy. I've seen a white trash woman put to the post for what you done, and what makes you any better? It was *you* that should have been tied to that post. It was *you* that should have been flogged half-dead."

"Then why didn't you do it?"

"Only because you're my brother's child, my niece, my own flesh and blood. Jesus, I'm glad Aaron ain't alive to know what you done." He let go of her wrist, shoved it away as if he wished to be rid of her.

"My father would not have believed what you believe."

"Maybe not. He always was too soft on you and Dulcy." He shook his head. "Christ, since Aaron went and got hisself killed, it seems like everything's gone wrong. Everything's coming apart. First, Dulcy a nigger, and now, you no better. I've had about enough of it."

She had thought she had shed her last tear, but he was bringing them to her eyes again. Somehow she had to get him out of her room. She had to be alone. "Uncle Joel, why are you here? What do you want from me?"

"I'm here because we've got to do something about ~~you~~ We can't have this thing with Jeb happening again."

"I know it's useless to tell you that nothing happened—"

"You're goddam right it is. Trouble with you is, you shoulda got married off long ago. Then you'd have a man around to give you what you want and keep an eye on you at the same time. Well, it ain't too late."

"And whom do you suggest that I marry?" she asked wearily. "Am I to marry Mr. Devereau?"

"Hell, no. I made us a little deal for you to marry Mr. Turnage."

"Mr. Turnage . . ." The words were nightmarish. Never in her life had she thought of marrying anyone remotely like Turnage. The idea was incomprehensible. "Uncle Joel, I couldn't possibly—I'd die first."

"Then, by God, lady," Joel Sabre exploded, "that's what you're gonna have to do—*die first!*"

"Uncle Joel, I won't marry him. I simply can't."

The blow came at last. It seemed to come out of nowhere, and the left side of her face exploded. Before she had recovered, hands gripped her shoulders and threw her back against the wall. Joel Sabre's face was crimson and veined.

"You heard what I said—*die first!*"

The other hand came up, broad and flat, and the other side of her face burst into flame.

She understood then what she should have known all her life: that this man might possibly kill her; that he was part of the deadly nigger-fearing white world from which her father had always tried to protect his daughters.

"Now, you listen to me," Joel Sabre said. "I got you a husband. Maybe he ain't quality, but he's sure as hell good enough for the likes of you, and he's willing to overlook and forget what you done. But if *you* think he ain't good enough for you—if that black boy ruined you for a white man—then I'm gonna have him flogged every day until he's dead. And if you don't die with him, you're sure as hell gonna wish you had!"

She seemed to be sailing on a tide of power, and nothing could stop her, nothing in the world. So her papa had thought she had no feeling for people, had he? Told

her she pushed them too far, didn't manage them right? He should see how she was managing them now.

In less than twenty-four hours Mr. Turnage had already become dissatisfied. She took care of that.

"But you gave me the idea there'd be more, Miss Amity. I thought there'd be more money."

"And there will be, Mr. Turnage, I promise you. You're gonna see a lot more money after the estate is settled. Patience, Mr. Turnage, honey. These things take time."

"And what about that five-year contract? I thought I'd be staying at Sabrehill for good."

"And you will be!" In the darkness of the little porch, she moved closer to Mr. Turnage and played with a strand of thread at the open neck of his shirt. "You will be, Mr. Turnage, because I want you to be. And besides that, you're overlooking something—something mighty important."

Mr. Turnage was intrigued. "And what would that be?"

"Why, the fact that my uncle ain't getting any younger, Mr. Turnage. And you're gonna be needed here more and more. I reckon that a long time before that five years is up, you and me'll be running Sabrehill. Just you and me, Mr. Turnage, and we'll run it our way." She let her fingertips stray to his throat. "What do you say to that?"

"I could do a lot with this place, given a free hand."

"I know you could, Mr. Turnage, and that's why I'm so eager to welcome you to the family. You're gonna be one of *us*, don't you see? One of *us*!"

The hungry smile came back to Mr. Turnage's face, the greedy light to his eyes. He was so easily managed that Amity could feel only contempt for him.

From the overseer's porch, she walked toward the office. Across the way, there was still light in Jebediah's cottage, and through the open door she saw moving figures. Apparently Dulcy and Leila were still with Jebediah, caring for him. Well, let them. Let them all be niggers together.

And now for Uncle Joel. She had plans for Uncle Joel. She found him in the office, as she usually did these

evenings, sitting quietly alone and drinking. His profound rage of the previous night had quite disappeared, but it seemed to have taken its toll: he looked smaller, wearier, older.

She leaned down and kissed him on the forehead. "Uncle Joel, honey, what you doing out here all alone?"

He gave her a wan smile. "Oh, just thinking. Come out here most every night and think."

"And what you think about?"

"Tonight? Oh, I been remembering back, trying to understand how things started. Remembering how Aaron came home after two years and brought Dulcy's momma with him. Aaron was real proud of her. Couldn'ta had much black blood—looked French or maybe Spanish."

"Lot of them got more nigger blood than they look like."

Joel Sabre didn't appear to hear her. "Small woman, Faith was. Beautiful, I guess. Smart as a whip. Just like Lucy says Jeb is."

"They're like monkeys, some of them. You can train them to do anything."

"Kept to herself. Didn't go out any more than she had to, and hardly ever entertained. Just kept house and read books and nursed the niggers."

"Her own people."

"A real stay-at-home. Aaron always enjoyed Charleston, but he stopped going, 'cause Faith didn't much like to go."

Amity walked around Joel and perched on the edge of his desk where she would be close to him. "Well, I reckon we know why now, Uncle Joel. She didn't come from New Orleans at all. She came from Charleston. And she was afraid she'd be seen and recognized. Here she was, living like a grand white lady at Sabrehill—and all the time scared that someone would say, 'Honey, you're just another nigger.'"

"I reckon. Anyway, here we all were at Sabrehill, and somehow she never took to me much. Just like I never took to Dulcy. Faith and me was always polite, and that was just about all."

"She was scared you'd sniff her out for what she was." Amity drew her uncle to her, resting his head beneath her breasts. "I think that was why you never took to Dulcy—because down deep you had a feeling that something was wrong. And now that we know what it is, haven't you noticed how you can just *smell* the nigger in her?"

Uncle Joel was embarrassed. "Amity, that ain't nice. Course she's a nigger, but she's still your sister."

"My half-sister, and I figure the black blood cancels out that half. She ain't a real Sabre, Uncle Joel, and you know it."

Uncle Joel sighed. "That's true. She ain't really one of us."

Amity smiled.

"Where's Lucy?" Joel Sabre asked. "Ain't seen her all day."

"She stayed in her room, mostly. Went out to see Jebediah once."

"She has got to leave that boy alone! What the hell is wrong with that woman? Ain't she learned her lesson?"

"I reckon not."

Uncle Joel shook his head, obviously troubled. "Amity, do you think we coulda made a mistake somehow?"

Amity was startled. This was no time for her uncle to start having doubts. "Uncle Joel, the evidence was perfectly clear."

"Even so . . . if it was Dulcy, I could understand. But Lucy?"

The fact was that Amity felt much the same way. Dulcy she sensed to be hot-blooded, and she supposed the newly discovered black blood explained why. But she could not for the life of her imagine Lucy having much of a passion for any man, and she suspected any loss of hymen was accidental. But she would hardly admit that to her uncle.

"Yes, Lucy," she said slowly. "If you're not convinced . . . well, I could convince you, Uncle Joel, but please don't make me."

He turned his head to frown up at her. "You could

convince me? You know even more than you've told me?"

"I could, but the problem's solved, with Lucy's getting married." She was thinking fast, improvising. "Let's just say the problem went back at least to the time that Lucy started to be an old maid."

"You telling me that Jeb wasn't the first?"

"Now, I ain't gonna have you go out and whip some poor innocent nigger boy that was victimized—"

"I ain't gonna whip nobody. But I want to know."

Amity closed her eyes. "Poor Papa had a real problem," she said. "Just how far she went with the others, I don't know."

"Oh, Christ!"

"When I accidentally found out about Lucy, I promised Papa I'd never tell. But now . . ."

"You were right to tell me."

Amity leaned down and kissed her uncle hard on the mouth. *So much for you, Sister Lucy.*

She remembered how defeated she had felt that evening less than a month ago when she had caught Dulcy with Quentin in the gazebo. Dulcy had apparently won Kimbrough Hall, and Amity had been left with only a dream of revenge. But where was Dulcy now? She was a nigger slave, a possession of Sabrehill, living in one of the outbuildings. No better than any other servant, as far as Amity was concerned. And where was Lucy? On her way out of the mansion and into the overseer's house, about to be married to a man she despised beyond all others. Never to be the mistress of Sabrehill.

And now Amity had plans for Uncle Joel.

"Uncle Joel, I've been thinking. . . . You've been under an awful strain lately."

"Yes, I have. And I feel it."

Amity massaged her uncle's temples; it was one of his great pleasures. "Of course you feel it. Papa's death . . . then learning about Dulcy . . . then Lucy. It woulda broke a lesser man. What I've been thinking is, as soon as the wedding's over, you ought to go to Charleston for a nice long rest. Have yourself a holiday."

He looked up at her. "Why, I couldn't do that, honey."

Here we are, right in the middle of summer. I can't go now."

"I don't know why not. Most of our neighbors do, either go to Charleston or farther up country till the cool weather comes."

"Aaron and I never did that much. Sent you girls away, but stayed with our people and looked after things ourselves. Feel now like I should do the same thing."

"But it's different now. You need the rest, and with Papa gone, we can't afford to have you wearing out on us. Got to keep you healthy and sound. Mr. Turnage and me, we can look after things for two or three months."

"I don't know," Uncle Joel said doubtfully. "Maybe I shouldn't say this, but since Mr. Turnage agreed to marry Lucy, I been wondering about his judgment."

"You're absolutely right. But don't forget that *I'll* be here, and I'll be keeping my eye on Mr. Turnage. Maybe I don't know everything about running a plantation yet, Uncle Joel, but I sure learned from you how to keep an eye on an overseer. I can tell if he's doing his job right or not, and he's gonna hear from me if he don't."

"I suppose you could always send for me if things went too bad wrong."

He's gonna do it, she thought. *He's gonna do it!* "Why, of course I can. And Kimbrough Hall ain't so far if I need some help or advice real fast. And the Devereau plantation, too. Why, I bet Mr. Paul would be glad to check on Mr. Turnage from time to time. Why don't you ask him?"

"Maybe I'll just do that. Maybe I will. I wouldn't mind getting away from here for a little while."

"Just one thing, Uncle Joel. Make sure that Mr. Turnage knows that until you come back *I* am the Sabre in charge here. Not the new Mrs. Turnage. She's just the housekeeper. *I* am in charge, and what *I* say goes."

"Oh, I'll make sure of that all right. Wouldn't have it any other way."

It's not gonna be any other way, she thought. *You're slipping, Uncle Joel. You're getting old. You're gonna find yourself taking life real easy from now on, and once I have the reins in my hands . . .*

She would have to speak to Paul Devereau again very soon. He would know where his best interests lay.

Everything was working out just beautifully.

The wedding was small, not at all what one might have expected when a Sabre girl married, and it took place with unseemly haste a mere few days after its announcement. And naturally, Lucy thought, it was causing all kinds of gossip. It was hardly common for the daughter of a great planter to marry an overseer, and Mr. Turnage was not even an aristocrat who had fallen on hard times. Mr. Turnage was generally assumed to be pretty much what he actually was: a competent, ignorant, uncouth plantation manager with dirt under his fingernails and a penchant for black girls. Why would a spinster of good breeding marry such a man and why in such haste? There could be only one answer.

But there was no question of not marrying him. She had been ordered to do it by her uncle, and some orders had to be obeyed. She would obey literally out of fear for her life and for that of Jebediah Hayes. With her uncle at her side, she dared not refuse to say the words: "I will."

She felt almost as badly for Dulcy as for herself. Everyone in the little Episcopal church in Riverboro knew her story by this time—Amity had seen to that. And of course everyone told each other how sorry they were for the poor child, to be brought up as a white and yet carry such a taint, and they treated Dulcy with painful kindness. The mulatto maid of honor to the fallen woman. Dulcy stood up to it quietly and with dignity.

The wedding took place on a sunny afternoon in early August. Afterwards, a party was held at Sabrehill. Because of the time of year, it was not nearly as large as the party some six weeks before, and there were no cock-fights, wrestling matches, or other sporting events—Uncle Joel thought them inappropriate to the occasion. But the guests ate and drank well and stayed long. The party was, Lucy decided with bleak amusement, a success.

Paul Devereau did nothing to remind her that he had courted her, and she wondered what he must think of her

now. If she had accepted his proposal, tendered more than once, this would never have happened, but there was no point in thinking of that. Before he left the party, he found her alone in the north parlor. "Be happy, Lucy," he said. "Be very, very happy." "Thank you, Paul. I shall try."

Because Mr. Turnage's services were required at Sabrehill, the wedding trip was to be postponed until late autumn. When night fell and the last guest had left, the bride and groom retired to their house.

She was frightened. Her knees shook, and there was a sickness in the pit of her stomach, but she hid the fright and even managed a smile. "It's nice," she said. "It's really very nice."

"It's what you give me," Mr. Turnage said. "Don't blame me if it ain't like the big house, 'cause all it is is what the Sabres give me."

At least the house was no longer the shambles Lucy had occasionally viewed through the open door. Several maids had been sent to clean it up, and they would help her keep it that way. The front room, with its comfortable old chairs and desk and cabinets, even had a certain charm.

Mr. Turnage went into the bedroom, and through the doorway she saw him light a lamp. When he returned, he said, "You can go get ready now." He turned away from her and pulled a jug and a cup out of a cabinet.

The sickness got worse. And there were things that had to be said.

"Mr. Turnage . . ."

"Well?" He poured some whiskey. "Want some?"

"No, but thank you. Mr. Turnage, we've hardly had a chance to talk these last few days."

"Wasn't much to talk about, was there?"

"We have . . . disagreed on certain things, Mr. Turnage. And I've expressed myself rather strongly. I just want to tell you that I regret some of the things I've said."

His laugh was short and humorless. "Yes, I reckon you do."

"I want you to know that I'm going to try to forget anything unpleasant that's happened in the past. I want

you to know that I'll try my best to be a good wife to you. I'll try to make you comfortable and happy. I'll keep to my marriage vows and—"

"Well, now, that's just fine, Miss—Mrs. Turnage. That's a mighty pretty speech. Why don't you start out by going to the bedroom and getting yourself ready."

She nodded, not at all sure that her words had reached him. "I just wanted you to know that I'll try."

She went into the bedroom, closing the door behind her.

The bridal chamber, she thought, and she tried to calm herself. This room, too, had been thoroughly cleaned, and, as one of the girls had promised, her clothes had been neatly put away, some tucked into drawers and others hung up in a cabinet. Because of lack of space, many of her belongings had been left in the big house, but what she needed most was here, and from a drawer she selected a nightgown. She felt a growing revulsion against stripping naked, and she decided to do her final undressing beneath the gown.

It would be all right, she told herself. Whatever she had thought of Mr. Turnage in the past, there was no reason she could not make a life for herself as his wife. In fact, her life need hardly change at all. She would continue to spend most of her days in the same way she always had, keeping house, planning meals, attending to the domestic affairs of Sabrehill. She would see the same old friends, the Kimbroughs and the Buckridges and the others, she would go to church in Riverboro, she would find time for her reading and her music.

Aside from that, she would sleep here rather than in the mansion. And she would see that this little house, as well as the mansion were well kept up. She would lend Mr. Turnage her body when he needed it and even try to take what pleasure she could from the act. The thought of his behavior with the black women of the plantation repelled her, but most men, having sowed their wild oats, ceased such behavior after marriage. Surely Mr. Turnage would do the same.

Yes, her life would go on, and it would not really be so different, not in any important respect. And she had

meant what she had told her new husband: she would do her very best to be a good wife to him.

She had put on her gown and was turning down the bed when Mr. Turnage pounded on the door.

"Ain't you ready yet?"

"Yes. come in."

He was wearing a nightshirt that came to his calves, and he had the cup of whiskey in his hand. *He's only a man, she thought, no different from any other man, and there's nothing to be afraid of, no more from him than from any other. He only wants what it's human to want, and there's no need to be afraid. . . .*

But she was afraid—afraid as she would have been of no other man she had ever met; afraid of the hard glitter in his eye and his twisted grin. As he came closer, she actually heard his teeth grind, as if he were about to commit an act of hatred. He set the cup down on the table and pulled her to him, swaying drunkenly.

She wanted to say, *Slowly, slowly, make me yours*, but he was intent on plunder. The rough mustache ground against her cheek, the yellowed teeth cut into her neck. There was no caress, only the grasping, greedy hand, and she had to fight not to cry out.

He shoved her across the bed. He jammed his knee hard against her thigh to signal her to get the rest of the way onto the bed. Then he went after her like—she could not hold back the thought—like a hog in a trough.

She tried to speak to him, tried to slow and gentle him. Even she, a lonely dreamer of love, could have taught him if he had listened. But the only answers she got to her whispers were the hands that ripped her gown and savaged her body and, when she resisted, came down in fierce hard blows across her face.

He pulled his nightshirt off and knelt naked over her. She tried to cover herself with her torn gown, but he ripped it away. He grinned down at her.

"Fine Sabrehill lady!"

She tried to answer something, she had no idea what. Her lips were swollen, and she tasted blood.

"Ought to see yourself now, Sabrehill lady. Look like something in a whorehouse."

She covered her eyes with a hand and held back her wail. Mr. Turnage laughed.

"Thought you was too good for Mr. Turnage, huh? Never thought you'd see the day you was Mrs. Turnage, did you? No, ma'am, you was too good. But you're Mrs. Turnage now, and you're gonna be Mrs. Turnage for the rest of your life. How do you like that, now?"

She tried to say something about wanting only to be a good wife.

"Oh, you're gonna be a good wife, all right. We gonna get along just fine. 'Cause you know what a wife is? She's a chattel, is what she is. Mrs. Turnage, you belong to me now, and I can do just about any damn thing with you that I want. And do you know what I'm gonna do now?"

"Don't . . ."

He raped her. Split her thighs apart, tore at her flesh, invaded her. There was not the faintest hint or echo of the things she had once dreamed of, the loving and the sharing—he raped her dreams as well as her body. When she tried to resist—she knew resistance was dangerous, but she could not help herself—his hand came slamming across her face again, slamming back and forth, time after time, until she was nearly unconscious. And he continued the assault.

Then at last it was over.

Afterwards, she felt curiously dead. She lay still on the bed, pretending to be asleep, while he wandered naked about the house, drinking and cursing her.

"Goddam Sabrehill lady. . . . Christ, you're all the same, aren't you? You act like you're something special, and then when the time comes, you're nothing, nothing at all. My God, I had niggers was better."

He was drunk, but the odd thing was that he seemed genuinely to be suffering. He staggered into the bedroom and leaned over the bed.

"And what's more, you wasn't even a virgin, was you?"

It was true that she had had no hymen, and if he had been the right man, she might have told him why. But now it was her secret forever.

She heard Turnage sip whiskey, heard him choke on it, felt a spray of it on her bare shoulders.

"Wasn't even a virgin. That sister of yours told me you had to be protected from that nigger. You an old maid without a man to do you, she was scared that Jeb would get at you. And all the time you was spreading for him, wasn't you. God damn. All the time he was getting into you. So now I got me a nigger-fucking wife."

I am twenty-nine years old, she thought, and this is what I've waited for all this time. This is what I've secretly dreamed of. This is my wedding night.

Ten

Dulcy was about to enter Jeb's cottage when she heard Irish call to her from across the courtyard. He pointed at the office, indicating that Amity wanted to see her, and she felt a little flutter in her stomach. It irritated her that she should be nervous about speaking to her own sister.

Amity was sitting at her father's desk when Dulcy stepped into the office. She could be found there more often than at any other place these days. She turned from the desk and looked up angrily at Dulcy.

"I saw you about to go into Jebediah's cottage." The tone was accusatory.

"Well, of course I was."

"I have told you at least two or three times, Dulcy, that I don't want you spending so much time with that nigger boy. We all know what kind of nigger he is."

"Somebody has to take care of him, Amity."

"Now, don't you talk back to me! Uncle Joel put me in charge of Sabrehill while he's away, and you are going to do as I tell you. And I am telling you, from now

on you are going to stay away from that Jebediah. You hear me?"

"But he needs me!"

"He needs another whipping is my guess what he needs." Amity shook her head. "Don't know why he can't get off his back and get out into the fields anyway. Time he earned his keep. He's spent enough time lazing about."

Dulcy could hardly believe her sister was serious. "He's not being lazy. Amity, it's less than three weeks since he was whipped, and he nearly died. He had a fever for over a week, and he can still hardly walk."

"You walked him out to the quarters last Saturday night, didn't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"You thought I didn't hear about that. Well, if he can walk out to the quarters, I reckon he can walk out to the fields and do some work. And I don't see why he can't live in the men's barrack, too."

"Because he's not ready. And you're not going to send him until Momma Lucinda says he's ready."

"Now, don't you sass me!"

Dulcy knew she had hit on a sore point. She had soon realized that any limitation of Amity's power was a sore point, and Lucy and Momma Lucinda were still in charge of the sick at Sabrehill, as they had been for years. Lucy, of course, had to be discrete where Jeb was concerned, and therefore in his case Momma Lucinda gave the law.

Amity sourly looked Dulcy up and down. "My God, look at you."

Dulcy glanced down at herself. She was wearing a shapeless, sleeveless, sacklike garment, stained and gray, the oldest thing she had been able to find. "Well, what do you expect?" she asked. "This is an old shift I wear when I'm tending the sick. You think I should scrub up some poor pickaninny wearing a ballroom gown?"

"I said, no sass! My God, Dulcy, you get more like a common uppity nigger every day."

Dulcy flushed. This was a theme Amity harped on constantly: Dulcy's supposed black qualities and their inferiority.

Amity turned back to their father's desk. "Get out of

here. I've got work to do. And remember what I said about Jebediah."

Dulcy gladly left the stifling office for the sweltering courtyard and crossed toward the kitchen where she saw Lucy through the doorway. So she wasn't to tend to Jeb, was she? She would see about that.

Lucy had not appeared at breakfast, and this was the first time that morning that Dulcy had seen her. She immediately spotted the fresh bruise under the left eye and the split upper lip.

"He's been hitting you again."

Lucy managed a slight smile. "Let's just say that my—my husband's advances are sometimes overly ardent." Lucy always had a hard time with the word husband.

"If Papa were here, he'd kill Mr. Turnage."

"No, I don't think so. He'd never interfere between—husband and wife."

"He would if you asked him. He couldn't duel with him, because Mr. Turnage is no gentleman, but he could flog him clear off the place. I don't think that even Uncle Joel would put up with the way Mr. Turnage is treating you."

"Well, neither Papa nor Uncle Joel is here, but somehow I imagine we'll survive."

"I suppose." Surely some things would change when Uncle Joel returned in the fall. "Lucy, there's something I've got to talk to you about. Amity acts more and more like she's in charge of everything around here."

"She is. Believe me, she is."

"But not in charge of tending the sick. That's what you do and what I've been helping you with. But just now she told me I wasn't to take care of Jeb anymore."

Lucy's eyes and jaw hardened. "Oh, she did, did she? And did she say who was to care for him?"

"No, she just told me to stay away from him."

"Well, I have other instructions for you. You go right on doing what you think is necessary for Jebediah, and if Amity objects again, you tell her to speak to me."

"Thank you. I'll do that."

Relieved and grateful, Dulcy left by the west door of the kitchen and walked toward Jeb's cottage, hardly caring

whether Amity saw or not. She had nursed Jeb all this time, and she had no intention of stopping now.

For days she had hardly left his bedside. At first Leila had been with her most of the time, and Momma Lucinda when she had time to spare, but gradually the task of caring for Jeb fell principally to Dulcy. That was the way she wanted it. Leila did what she could in spite of her broken arm, sponging Jeb to reduce his fever, but it was largely up to Dulcy to change the bandages, squeeze the suppurations, and get what food she could down his throat. There was the everpresent danger of tetanus. When the fever finally broke and the wounds began to heal, Momma Lucinda said, "Maybe you don't know it, child, but you saved this boy's life."

Jeb lived for the most part lying on his stomach. He said nothing. His eyes were sometimes open, but they seemed blind. Insofar as he could, he responded to every request, but he was like a great, naked, mindless doll, and Dulcy gradually realized that something more than his flesh had been torn apart, something more than a few ribs in his chest had been broken. He himself had been broken.

She determined to put him back together again.

She had to. She remembered the day she had first seen him, handsome and proud in spite of defeat and the whipping that was yet to come. She had thought, *I'm black, too, a little, and if I were black like you . . .* And something in her had gone out to him, something perhaps even deeper than her feeling for Quentin Kimbrough.

"I'm going to make you well, Jebediah. Don't you worry, you're going to get well."

It was hard work, and she hardly knew how to go about it, but she persisted. She spent as much time with him as she could, talking to him cheerfully, reassuringly, inconsequentially, until she began to evoke responses, however slight. Dissatisfied with that, she deliberately tried to make him angry by speaking of Turnage's treatment of Lucy, and she was pleased to see new life come to his eyes. But her greatest step forward came when she inadvertantly caused him to cry.

"You know," she told him, "my papa was going to

set me free when I was eighteen—that's next October. Now Uncle Joel is going to do it. And do you know what I did the day he left for Charleston? I said, 'Uncle Joel, you don't want that no-count Jebediah around here, and if you sell him to a trader, you won't get a farthing for him with that back of his. I'll tell you what I'll do. When you set me free and give me my money, I'll give you top dollar for him. I've got to have a man to tote my trunk and bags up to Boston, and it might as well be Jebediah.' You see, Jeb, when we get to Boston, we'll *both* be free, and . . . Hey, now, Jebediah, what's the matter with you?"

When she had told him the same thing before, he had not seemed to hear. Now he wept and shook his head, denying that he would ever be free, and as she held and comforted him, she felt that she had been cruel.

But the next day, though he still refused to believe he would be free, he acted almost normal. He chatted quietly with her, laughed a little, showed an interest in the books on the bedroom table. And the following Saturday evening, she persuaded him to hobble painfully out to a party in the quarters, where they were great curiosities and honored guests.

Each day a little better, she thought now, as she went toward the cottage. Each day another step toward a restored Jebediah and their mutual freedom. Each day—

The door of the cottage opened, and Leila, the splint now gone from her arm, stepped out. Something in her manner stopped Dulcy. She had a sly smile, as if she might burst out laughing.

"What's the matter with you?" Dulcy asked. "You look like the cat that stole the cream."

"It's Jeb," Leila said. "He sure is a lot better now."

"Of course he is. Didn't you know that?"

"What I mean is, it seems like old goddam Turnage didn't ruin him after all."

"How do you know that?"

Leila's smile widened. "Why, honey child, Jeb done showed me."

Dulcy was stunned. Leila sailed on by her, and she stood right where she was, unmoving. She felt cheated, deprived, betrayed. All this time she had been looking

after Jebediah, all this time she had been worrying about him, trying to help him, and now Leila . . .

She started toward the cottage again. She entered without knocking and walked back to the bedroom. Jeb, as was usual now, wore loose clothing over his remaining bandages and sat up in bed. He looked up from his book and smiled at her as she entered the room. She found it impossible to return the smile.

"Did you get your breakfast all right?"

"Irish brought me some."

"Good." Dulcy hesitated. "Leila tells me you've made a remarkable recovery."

Jeb's smile faded. "If I have, I guess you know that better than anybody."

"Do I, now? I guess no better than Leila. Wasn't she the first one you showed your . . . your recovered powers? And now you'll be showing that big old thing to Genevra too, I guess, and to Vidette and all the others."

Jeb looked embarrassed. "Miss Dulcy, you shouldn't talk like that. It's not ladylike."

"Mr. Hayes, let us get one thing clear. I am not a lady. The only lady on this plantation that I know of is my sister Lucy. As the whole world now knows, I was not born a lady, and, except for three years up north, I wasn't really brought up one. I was born a slave, the same as you, and according to the law I still am one. You might keep that in mind."

He regarded her gravely. "Miss Dulcy, if I've offended you in any way, I'm truly sorry."

She turned to the door. "You haven't. Besides, it doesn't matter. I don't own you. Not yet, anyway."

"You've changed since that afternoon when I first saw you, do you know that?"

"Yes, I think I probably have. And now if you'll excuse me, Mr. Hayes, I think I'll be going. You don't really need me anymore. Leila and the others, they can take care of you from now on."

Before he could say anything more, she hurried out of the cottage. She was hurt and angry and deeply disappointed, and she didn't really know why.

When she reached the kitchen, Irish informed her for

the second time that morning that Amity wished to speak to her.

Amity laughed aloud. Everything was working so beautifully. She hadn't really expected Dulcy to stay away from Jebediah, and, in fact, would have been disappointed if she had. But Dulcy had done exactly what Amity had intended her to do.

She waited in anticipation mingled with just a touch of fear. There was always the chance that you would go too far, and this time she was taking a giant step. But she had learned that power grew, step by step, with its exercise. You had to grab the lightning.

She heard the approaching footsteps in the gravel outside the door, and she arose from the desk, giving Dulcy a look of grim satisfaction as she entered. But she couldn't keep the satisfaction from turning to surprise when Lucy stepped in behind her.

"I didn't call for you," she said. "You're not needed."

"I think I may have something to say."

Amity nodded slowly and turned back to Dulcy. Let Lucy hear. Let it be done with.

"I guess you know why I called you back here again?"

"About Jebediah."

"That's right. You defied me, didn't you, Dulcy. Just a little while ago I told you to stay away from that boy, and what did you do? Almost at once you went to see him. You clearly disobeyed my orders."

"She obeyed my instructions, Amity," Lucy said calmly. "She's been looking after Jebediah, and I told her to continue doing so."

"Oh, *you* told her to continue doing so. And didn't you know that *I* told her—"

"I'm not in the least interested in what you told her. Amity, I'm quite sure you're far better acquainted with the business of this plantation than I am. I've heard Uncle Joel say how good you are in such matters. However—"

"He told me I was in charge," Amity said flatly. She felt cold and hard, and she made her voice sound that way.

"He also told me to carry on as usual. That means

running the household and seeing to it that the sick are cared for."

"I told Dulcy to stay away from that nigger."

"And I told her to look after him! Dulcy assists me. This is not your affair, Amity."

Lucy's voice had risen; Amity liked that, though she was careful not to show it. She looked directly into Lucy's eyes and thought, as if willing it: *I am going to win. I am going to win.*

She said, "I think there's been a slight misunderstanding. We'd better iron it out right now. Who is running this plantation while Uncle Joel is away?"

Lucy hesitated. "I'm running the house—"

"I am in charge, and you know it. I even had Uncle Joel put it in writing in case you forgot. Yes, you do run the house, but I am in charge of everybody who works at Sabrehill, black or white, and that includes Dulcy."

"I don't think that was Uncle Joel's intention—"

"I couldn't care less what you think."

Lucy's face was flushed, and her mouth twitched with suppressed anger. She didn't seem to trust herself to speak. She said, "Come, Dulcy—we've listened to enough of this nonsense."

Amity had been waiting for this moment. Her voice was harsh with anger, but it hid a kind of glee. "Oh, no, you don't. You leave here before I'm through with you, and Jebediah goes right back to the post. I'll have Mr. Turnage finish the whipping he only started before. I'll tell him it's time for another beating, and you know he'll do it."

Lucy's face seemed to disintegrate. Dulcy's showed a kind of blind horror.

"I mean it," Amity went on. "That nigger touched a white woman. Do you think Uncle Joel's gonna give one single damn if I have him flogged dead?"

She waited. Dulcy appeared gradually to calm, but Lucy had trouble breathing. She said, "He never—you know he didn't—you wouldn't do that!"

Dulcy touched Lucy's arm. "Be quiet. Of course she would. What do you want, Amity?"

I've got them, Amity thought. I've got them!

"I'll tell you what I want. If you intend to look after Jebediah, I don't suppose I can stop you." A smile flickered over Dulcy's lips like a shadow of defiance. That was all right; Amity smiled back. "But you're gonna pay for it."

"How am I going to pay?"

"Remember when we was little, whenever we did something Papa didn't like, he'd make us take a hoe out into the fields for a while? You almost seemed to enjoy it. Took to it like a happy nigger."

"I remember."

"Well, that's what you're gonna do tomorrow. And each day you so much as speak to Jebediah, the next day you're gonna work in the fields. Now, I can't keep an eye on you all the time, Dulcy, so I'm just gonna have to trust you. Any day you give me your word you haven't spoken to Jebediah—and you'd better not lie—you don't have to—"

"Oh, this is ridiculous!" Lucy exploded. "Dulcy is your sister, not a field hand. And she's not a child to be disciplined!"

"She ain't a child, but she is a nigger!"

"You are actually going to send her into the fields with a work gang?"

"It's her choice."

"And if your friends learn what you've done—the Kimbroughs, the Buckridges—have you thought what they'll say?"

"We'll find out, won't we?"

Lucy drew herself up. It was as if she were summoning all of her strength, her last strength. "No," she said. "Dulcy is not going to do this."

Amity shrugged. "All right. I'm not going to try to force her. But when Mr. Turnage gets back from the fields this evening, Jebediah is going back to the whipping post. And it's gonna be a lot worse this time—"

"No!"

"It's Dulcy in the fields or Jebediah at the post. Make up your mind."

For an instant Amity thought Lucy was going to attack her, but Dulcy clung to her and held her back.

"All right, Amity," she said quietly, "I'll do what you want. I guess it won't hurt me to get a few blisters on my hands. But you leave Jebediah alone. He's suffered enough."

I've done it, Amity thought, concealing her jubilation. I've really done it. I've actually put the little bitch out into the fields. And I'll keep on putting her out there every time she defies me. I'll even find a way to do it after Uncle Joel comes back.

She nodded brusquely. "You can go now."

A few blisters! She laughed to herself as she watched the pair leave. It was her considered opinion that Dulcy was going to find the fields much more painful than she expected.

When she returned to the cottage, Jeb was still sitting on his bed reading a book. As she entered the bedroom, he looked up without saying anything. After a moment, she walked around the bed and sat down on its side facing him.

"Not angry anymore?" he asked.

"Not angry," she said.

She let her head fall forward onto his shoulder.

She awakened before dawn feeling happy and even a little excited at the prospect of the day ahead of her. She had not visited the fields since her return home, but she remembered them from her childhood as being pleasant in spite of the hard work and the occasional crack of a whip over a slacker. She remembered the jokes that lightened the day and the songs that set the work rhythm, and she really didn't know why Lucy had made such a fuss.

She put on the same ancient shift she had worn the day before and the oldest pair of shoes she had. At the last moment she remembered she would need protection from the sun, and she found an old straw hat. There were going to be some mighty surprised hands out there today, she thought, smiling to herself.

In the kitchen she found Momma Lucinda in the midst of preparing breakfast.

"Just give me some milk and biscuits, Momma. I have to hurry."

"Hurry can wait. You eat your breakfast right."

"Can't do it. I'm going to work in the fields today, and I don't want to be late."

"You gonna *what*?"

"Bar cotton, chop cotton, I don't know. Whatever I'm told."

"Are you out of your head, child? That's no work for a young lady."

"Why does everybody keep calling me a young lady? You all know what I am."

"Now, don't you talk like that! You coming back here for noon dinner?"

"I don't know."

"If'n you don't, I'll send out Irish with something for you."

After her hasty breakfast, she found a hoe, the tool she was most likely to need, in the storehouse and walked out to the field quarters. Tasks were already being assigned and work gangs organized, and those hands who knew her best greeted her with some amusement.

"What you doing here? Think you still a pick-aninny?"

"Dulcy-child bring her own hoe!"

"Miss Dulcy, you be my helper?"

"Dulcy-child, 'member the time . . ."

The chatter and laughter faded when the overseer approached. He gave Dulcy a thin smile.

"Understand you're gonna help us out today, Miss Dulcy."

"That I am, Mr. Turnage, if it's all right with you."

"Oh, it's fine with me, Miss Dulcy. I'm sure you'll find it a day to remember."

The hands moved out. Most of them already knew where they were to go and what they were to do. By the time the sun was up, Dulcy found herself in a field with Turnage, a hand named Zagreus, and a driver named Hayden. She had seen the hand and the driver before, but she did not really know them. The only other hands

in sight, she noticed with some disappointment, were several hundred yards away.

"Now, Zag," Turnage said, "I want you to help Miss Dulcy. I want the two of you to go up and down the rows side by side, and, Zag, you keep a look out on Miss Dulcy's rows and get anything she misses, 'cause she ain't used to this work. Think you can do that?"

Zag nodded and said that, yes, he could do that.

"And now and then Hayden here will come around and see how things are going." Turnage sounded almost kindly. "All right, start chopping."

Chopping cotton was actually a matter of chopping weeds and grass—of bringing them up by hand or with a hoe and cutting them up so they would die. At Sabrehill the smallest were left to dry in the sun, but larger weeds and those going to seed were thrown into a basket.

Dulcy set to it with a will, inspecting her row carefully and trying to develop a rhythm. Humming and whistling, she sought out each little outlaw leaf and vine, ripped it up, and destroyed it. "Miss Dulcy," Zag said, pleased, "you've chopped cotton before!"

He was a pleasant youth, about ten years older than she, and they began to chat. She told him about her northern adventures, and he helped her to rediscover the art of chopping. "Watch out for your back, Miss Dulcy. Use your knees more. Gon' be while 'fore your back is strong."

He was right. Within the hour her back was aching, and she began to slow down. She also wondered if she shouldn't have brought something to protect her hands.

"Better bend over that hoe, Miss Dulcy," Zag said as she was inspecting her palms. "Here come old Hayden."

Dulcy smiled and went back to her chopping. Aching back or not, she was willing to play the game.

Coiled whip in hand, Hayden came strolling along the edge of their field. He was a strongly built sullen-looking man in his middle thirties. He didn't look at either of them. Glancing behind her, Dulcy saw him turn up their rows, walking slowly between them, eyes down, as he inspected the job they had done. Glancing again, she

saw him stoop and pick something up from her row. He then walked on, inspecting carefully until he came to where they were working.

Zag straightened up from his hoe as Hayden approached. Without a word, Hayden extended his hand to show what he had found along Dulcy's row, and it was undeniably a weed—such a large one that she didn't see how she could possibly have missed it.

Zag looked nervously at the weed, at Dulcy, at Hayden.

"You s'posed to see Miss Dulcy don't miss none," Hayden said.

Without another word, he stepped back from Zag, and before Dulcy realized what was going to happen, the whip came cracking down on Zag's back. Zag cried out.

"And you ain't done enough," Hayden said, "not nearly enough."

"Ain't true!" Zag protested. "Always do my share!" "Slacker."

The whip sizzled through the air again, harder this time, and Zag screamed and nearly fell. Dulcy grabbed him to support him. The whipping had been totally unexpected, and she felt as if she were in a state of shock.

"Now, work," Hayden said, and marched off.

Dulcy continued to steady Zag until he shrugged her away. "I'm sorry, Zag," she said. "I don't know where that weed came from. I don't know how I missed it."

"That's all right, Miss Dulcy," Zag said, still in pain, "but please don't miss no more."

No longer laughing or talking, they went back to work. Dulcy told herself that she had to work faster, *had* to work faster, and she made her hoe fly.

"Careful, now, Miss Dulcy," Zag warned her. "You go too fast, you miss something. Or you knock down some cotton, that make Hayden *real* mad."

The sun, hot from the moment it had come up, began to broil them. Sweat flowed into Dulcy's eyes, blinding her, it flowed between her breasts and down her belly and legs. She began to itch. Dirt clung to her legs and got into her shoes. Her hands became raw, and her back

began to feel as if it were broken. When a waterboy came, Zag had to restrain her from drinking too much and becoming sick.

After two hours Hayden returned.

Again he walked slowly and carefully between the rows, making his inspection. Again he stooped and picked something up from Dulcy's row.

When he reached them, he again held out his hand toward Zag. There were four weeds in his palm, and this time Dulcy might very well have overlooked them, they were so small.

"Ain't you looking at Miss Dulcy's row at all?" Hayden asked.

"Why, that ain't nothing, Hayden," Zag protested. "I bet you find bigger weeds in *my* row."

Hayden stepped back, and Zag cringed. Dulcy heard herself cry out, "Oh, no!" and then the whip was singing again. It came down four times, putting the screaming Zag on his knees.

"And this is for arguing," Hayden said.

He brought the whip down once more, harder than ever, and Dulcy saw blood coming through Zag's shirt.

Hayden walked off.

The rest of the morning was an agony. Hayden's final blow had almost crippled Zag, and Dulcy had the feeling that they were no longer working but fighting—fighting simply to get through the day in spite of its agony. When Hayden appeared again, late in the morning, she wanted to weep.

But this time he did not inspect their rows. He walked directly to where they were standing and looked back the way they had come.

"This all you done?"

Neither answered.

Zag began to cry out and fall to his knees before Hayden even raised the whip. Hayden brought it down twice. The blows were perhaps the lightest he had given, but they were quite enough, on top of the ones already received. When Hayden left, Zag did not get up immediately, but lay in the dirt and wept.

It's my fault, Dulcy thought miserably. I'm the one who can't keep up, I'm the one who missed the weeds. He's being whipped because of me.

When it was well past noon, a horn blew in the distance, signaling that it was time to eat and to rest. The summer rest period was long at Sabrehill—two hours, to get past the worst heat of the day. Those nearest the quarters would return to them for their meal; those farthest might, if they wished, have food brought out to them. A boy brought Zag his midday meal, and Irish appeared with a poke of food for himself and Dulcy. He looked at her as if he didn't believe his own eyes.

"I didn't even recognize you," he said, shocked. "I was right here with you before I even knew you."

Dulcy tried to smile.

They ate by a nearby oak-shaded stream, the coolest place they could find. After wolfing down her food, Dulcy threw away her ruined shoes and submerged herself completely in the warm, slow-moving water. She tried to soak the aches and pains out of herself, tried not to think of the sun, the long rows of cotton, and above all the whip, but they crowded in on her mind. There was no escaping them. In a single morning they had become her entire world.

When she came out of the water, Irish was gone. She climbed up on the bank, her wet shift clinging to her, and sat down beside Zagreus, who lay still on his stomach, his eyes closed.

"Zag, you awake?"

"Yes'm."

"I want to tell you I'm sorry. I'm sorry I didn't chop fast enough."

"You chop fine," Zag mumbled. "Fast as anybody."

"I'm sorry about the weeds, too. I'm sorry I got you whipped."

"Ain't your fault. Can't help being Miss Dulcy like you is."

"You mean, because everybody knows I'm Miss Dulcy, I won't get whipped?"

"Yes'm."

"And you've got to take my whippings for me?"

Zag nodded, and guilt flooded through Dulcy. She had no desire to be whipped, but the injustice of the situation angered her.

When they returned to the field, it was as if she had had no rest at all. The sun was just as hot as ever, and the rows of cotton stretched out endlessly. When she had worked ten feet of a row, she thought her back was going to break forever, and her raw hands could hardly grip the hoe. It swung wildly and knocked down a couple of cotton plants. When Zag saw, he whimpered, and she knew he was thinking of the whip. She hastily buried the destroyed plants.

Hayden appeared after they had been back in the fields an hour. For Zag's sake, Dulcy tried to appear industrious, though her impulse was to turn on the driver and brain him with her hoe. Hayden performed his inspection more casually now, shaking his head from time to time with disgust.

"Zag," he said, "she done knocked down some plants here."

"Wasn't no plants there," Zag said, his eyes widening with fear. "Was a little hole in the row."

"Don't lie. I get tired whipping you."

"Wasn't no plants!"

How Hayden had known about the plants, Dulcy had no idea unless he had been watching her from a distance. With a kind of horror, she watched the driver approaching the field hand, Zag fearing the whip yet also fearing to run, and she thought, *It's my fault, it's my fault!* Hayden flexed the whip with both hands and drew it back. He sent it flying across Zag's shoulders.

"No!" Dulcy could stand no more. Dropping her hoe, she ran to put herself between Hayden and Zag. "All right, there's some cotton chopped down," she said defiantly, "and I did it. If you're going to use that whip, use it on me!"

Hayden smiled lazily. "Now, Miss Dulcy, you know I can't use no lash on you." He extended the handle of the whip toward Zag. "Zag, you want to use this lash on Miss Dulcy? Just one time?"

"Do it!" Dulcy said quickly. "Do it!"

She saw the temptation in Zag's eyes. Ordinarily he might never think seriously of hurting her, but now? After ten lashes and the threat of another? When she herself told him to go ahead? He wanted to do it.

But he could not. The light in his eyes died, and he turned away. His shoulders drew up together while he waited for the whip to fall—and Hayden made him wait.

When it fell at last, Zag fell to his hands and knees. His head hung low.

"Lemme go now, Hayden," he sobbed. "Lemme go quarters. Please, Hayden."

"Stop slacking," Hayden said. "Get to work."

Dulcy knew that a dozen or so stripes were not necessarily such a terrible punishment; it depended on the whip and how it was handled. But Hayden's use of the whip had obviously been brutally efficient. For the rest of the day Zag staggered about, barely able to stand, and Dulcy found herself trying to do his share of the work as well as her own. But there was no possible way that she could. Wracked with fatigue, sun-baked, wretched with sweat and dirt, she had all she could do just trying to keep going.

When Hayden appeared again, Zag made no pretense of working. He leaned on his hoe and quietly wept. Hayden sauntered casually toward them, taking his time, here and there pulling a weed and tossing it aside.

"Look like you ain't done nothing at all, Zag," he said. "Ain't help Miss Dulcy one bit."

Dulcy watched him through prisms of sweat.

"Look at all these weeds, Zag. Whyn't you chop?"

"God damn you," Dulcy said.

"Hear that, Zag? Miss Dulcy say 'God damn you.' Don't blame her one bit."

"God damn damn damn *you*." The words came out slowly and passionately. Dulcy had not said them since childhood.

"Guess I got to flog you, Zag. Five, six stripes at least. You let poor Miss Dulcy spoil cotton, weeds still all around. Got to flog you."

Hayden flexed the whip. He snapped it to one side. He swung it up into a ready position. And then he made Zag wait.

"God damn you!" Dulcy cried.

Hayden shot the whip out across Zag's back. Zag arched and almost fell. Hayden lifted the whip again, waited for a few seconds, and lashed him again. Zag dropped his hoe and bent far over but didn't quite fall.

"Miss Dulcy mighty obliged, you taking this flogging for her, Zag."

Zag slowly turned his head to look at Dulcy, and for the first time she saw naked hatred in his eyes. She was the cause of his being whipped. If it hadn't been for her, if she hadn't been Miss Dulcy, if only she had been any other black wench—

Hayden shoved the whip handle into Zag's hand. "She still got three, four coming if'n you got the guts to give'm."

"Do it, you fool!" Dulcy screamed. "Do it!"

Zag came at her like a mad man, and the first blow across her back knocked her off her feet. It was like being hit with a hot poker—she had not known it would be this bad. She fell into the dirt, and as the second blow burned across her, tried desperately to crawl away from it, tried to crawl like a wounded animal. A third burning stripe crisscrossed the first two, and a fourth cut over her buttocks. She seemed to be burning alive.

Through her own maddened howling, she heard Hayden laugh, and she rolled to one side to see him holding Zag back. "That enough, that enough," Hayden said. "Just to get her flogged is all."

And then Dulcy understood.

Even if she was known now to be a bondswoman with black blood, what driver would have the nerve to whip Miss Dulcy Sabre of the big house? What hand who had known the Dulcy-child from infancy would want to? But put Dulcy with a hand and a driver who did not know her well, and make the hand pay for every mistake Dulcy made and perhaps for a few she didn't, and soon you

would have someone who would willingly flog her—flog her like any other slave, or worse.

Amity had planned well.

She was one of the last to come in from the fields. Her muscles were already stiffening, her back was still on fire, and every step was painful. It seemed hours before the lights of the big house and the surrounding buildings came into sight, and as she crossed the courtyard only the thought that Amity might be watching kept her walking upright and straight.

"Dulcy," Momma Lucinda called from the kitchen, "you finally here?"

"Yes, it's me, Momma." Dulcy tried to put some cheer in her voice. It was impossible. She wanted to cry.

"'Bout time. Come get your supper."

"Soon's I clean up."

Each step as she approached home had seemed harder than the last. By the time she reached the kitchen well, she found it almost impossible to walk. She drew a pail of water and poured it over her face and hands and arms with a dipper. She had to bite both lips to hold back her tears.

"You all right, Dulcy?" Momma Lucinda called into the darkness.

"Oh, I'm fine, Momma."

She could not go back out to the fields tomorrow. There was absolutely no way that she could survive another day like today. She would force herself to eat a little, though she had no hunger, and then she would finish cleaning herself and go to bed and sleep forever.

And Amity would have won.

Amity would have succeeded in doing exactly what she had set out to do. Humiliate her. Break her.

The tears came at last.

Amity, she thought, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry for everything I ever did to you. I'm sorry I made a pest of myself when I was little. I'm sorry I chased you and your beaux around. And I DID try to get their attention away from

you sometimes, and I'm sorry for that. And I'm sorry I fell in love with Quentin Kimbrough. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry for everything.

But I'll be God DAMNED if I'm going to let you beat me now!

Jebediah would be waiting. After she had eaten her supper and cleaned herself, she would go to him.

Eleven

"Jebediah? . . . Jebediah, is it all right if I come in?"

He tried to remember if Dulcy had ever asked before. He thought not. Not after the many days and long hours she had cared for him.

"Jebediah?"

"Please don't come in, Miss Dulcy."

"Aren't you alone?"

Of course. That was why she had asked. After yesterday, she would always think that Leila or one of the others might be with him.

"Yes, I'm alone, but you know you shouldn't come in."

He heard her footsteps before he had finished speaking, and he tossed his book aside on the bed. He had not been able to read anyway, for thinking of her.

She wore a fresh summer dress and had a well-scrubbed look, he saw as she pulled open the mosquito netting, but her face and arms were badly burned, and her dark eyes were half-closed with weariness. Yet she smiled.

"Why didn't you want me to come in, Jebediah?"

"You know why."

She nodded. "I thought that was it. Lucy told you about the silly quarrel Amity and I had."

"Silly? If you hadn't done as she said, I would have been whipped again. Maybe killed."

Dulcy settled down on the bed beside him. "Well, now, you weren't whipped, and I had a nice day out in the fields with all of my old friends. Something I've been meaning to do ever since I got home."

He didn't believe her. Amity Sabre wouldn't have sent her into the fields to sit in the shade and chat with old friends, and every move she made suggested exhaustion. He took one of her hands, and, as he expected, it was blistered and raw. She winced when he touched her palm.

"I tried chopping cotton," she said. "I should have worn gloves or wrapped something around the hoe."

These were the hands that had saved his life, he thought. They had no business chopping cotton.

"Dulcy-child, did Miss Amity see you come here?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe she didn't. Maybe if you leave right now, she'll never know you were here, and you won't have to go back out tomorrow."

She shook her head. "I have to go. And I wouldn't be here if I weren't willing to go."

He understood. It was a necessary defiance, a way of maintaining pride and integrity and inner freedom in spite of her sister and the laws that made her a slave. It was something he understood well, and he couldn't argue against it.

"How long will she keep sending you out there?"

"Until I do as she says, I guess. Or until Uncle Joel comes back. Or until I'm free. Let's not talk about it."

"Can you write to your uncle? Will he do something to help you?"

"Lucy's writing, but it won't do any good. Uncle Joel can't understand anything he can't see with his own eyes." She yawned broadly and leaned against his shoulder. "Jebediah, I am so sleepy. Tell me a story. Tell me what it'll be like when we get up north."

"What it will be like, Miss Dulcy? Why . . ."

No words came. The imagination failed. He had not the slightest belief, not the dimmest hope, that he would accompany Dulcy to the North, and therefore he had nothing to say. The rage was gone, the necessary madness, whipped out of him. On the day he could hobble about without crutches, he would return to the fields, there to follow orders, never raising his hand, his voice, or his head. He would no doubt feel the whip from time to time, but not often. He was safe even from that now. Because Mr. Turnage would know he had been broken and would soon lose interest in him. Mr. Turnage had won, and the dream was dead.

He had no expectation other than to remain a field hand for the rest of his life.

Dulcy had slipped off of his shoulder and nestled down onto the bed where she lay asleep. Why had she worked so hard to save him and to heal him, he wondered. Terrified though he had been of mutilation and death, in his own eyes he now hardly seemed worth her effort. It was herself, and herself alone, that she should be struggling to save.

He saw the two welts across the back of her left arm.

He looked at them, hardly believing them but unable to deny them. They were there, and no one knew the marks of the whip better than he did. He touched them, feeling their firmness and their warmth.

But it was incredible that she should carry such marks. He moved his hand to the back of her dress, trying to feel through it, careful not to disturb her. He could not be certain what he felt. Very slowly, very cautiously, he slipped his hand down the neck of her dress.

There was no doubt about it: his fingertips found a long stripe leading to yet another, a cross of whip marks on her back.

He withdrew his hand, and for the first time in weeks he felt that there might be some anger left in him. He remembered being on his back, Joel Sabre's knife poised over him while Miss Amity screamed, "*Cut him! Cut him!*", and he knew that she was out to break Dulcy as

he had been broken. And he could not allow that to happen.

But how could he possibly stop it? He hadn't even been able to save himself. The most he could do, he thought bitterly, was to heal so that he could watch after her, perhaps protect her a very little, and try to give her some comfort. Aside from that he could do nothing. He was defeated, powerless, merely another slave.

Using the crutches Irish had made for him, he went out into the courtyard. A few lights still burned in the big house and the outbuildings, though the office was dark. Sabrehill seemed quiet and peaceful. There was no longer any blood on the grass where he had almost been mutilated.

He found Momma Lucinda and Vidette in the kitchen and asked them to take Dulcy back to her house.

From the window of the darkened office Amity watched Jeb bring Momma Lucinda and Vidette to his cottage, and a few moments later they emerged with Dulcy. The day had taken its toll. Dulcy was obviously half-asleep and had to be led by the other two women. They went around the cottage and disappeared into the darkness to the west of the kitchen.

So Dulcy had defied her again and would be going back out to the fields in the morning. That was fine. She saw now that it was to her advantage to keep Dulcy in the fields as long as possible. Let her keep going back day after day like any other common field hand.

Amity turned away from the window. Across the room the coal of Paul Devereau's cigar glowed in the darkness.

"You really don't think this will hurt me too much with our friends?" she asked.

"It may hurt you with some, at least for a while," he conceded, "because people are used to thinking of Dulcy as white. But the damage won't be permanent. Remember, you've always got two facts to fall back on. Dulcy is a slave and always has been, whether people knew it or not. And Dulcy is black. It doesn't matter a damn if she's only a quarter or an eighth or a sixteenth, she's

still black. And every day that she's out in the fields, the blacker she gets."

"You mean she gets to be known as a black."

"That's right. And that's legally important in this state. Dulcy may be black, but if her features don't clearly show it, she'd better be black by reputation. And that's what you want to give her. The reputation."

Amity crossed the room and sat with Paul Devereau on the couch.

"Paul, honey," she said, "you just don't know how grateful I am for all this advice you've been giving me. You know I don't really want to hurt poor Dulcy, but I do want what's right under my papa's will. And I don't want her putting any kind of claim on Sabrehill."

Devereau patted her hand. "Don't you worry. Do you know how many cousins and uncles I have sitting in law offices and judge's benches in this state? You just take care of things here at Sabrehill and leave the legal business to me."

"You don't blame me for looking out for my own best interests?"

His head turned slowly toward her, and in the glow of his cigar coal she could see his brooding eyes. "Amity, my dear," he said, "we're *all* looking out for our best interests."

Two days later, on Saturday, a messenger brought her an invitation to Sunday dinner at Kimbrough Hall, and she sent back her acceptance at once. It amused her to think that this was the first time that Mrs. Kimbrough had invited her to dinner without also inviting her sisters. But who would invite the wife of an uncouth overseer, not to speak of the overseer himself? And who would invite a slave girl, now known to be working in the fields? After all, there were people who now would not even drink from the same cup as Miss Dulcy Sabre.

She knew why she had been invited to dinner, of course: it was a summer of tragedy and scandal at Sabrehill, and the Kimbroughs were eager to learn the truth about the latest juicy gossip that Paul Devereau had passed along. Dulcy, working as a common field hand? How had this come about? Why?

The subject was approached slowly and circuitously: "And how *is* Dulcy these days? How is dear Lucy? We haven't seen Dulcy since the wedding. . . ." Amity let them hunger. A sad glance, a reflective moment, whetted their appetites. Melanie, her mother, and her father waited to pounce on any crumb of information, while Quentin maintained an embarrassed silence.

At last, as they took coffee on the piazza, the matter was broached directly. Mrs. Kimbrough—motherly, concerned—said that they had heard some very peculiar rumors about Dulcy working as a common field hand. Amity sighed and admitted the truth of the rumor.

"And I," she said, "have been at my wits' end. I just don't know what to do to help poor Dulcy."

"But, my dear, I don't understand."

"Mrs. Kimbrough, let me put it this way. Like takes to like. Dulcy was brought up white, but looking back, you can see the effect of colored blood. When she was little, Dulcy played with the colored pickaninnies more than any other *white* child you ever saw. She was always playing about the kitchen and the spinning house and the wash house—anywhere there was colored. She used to run off with the cook's boy, Irish, and the other black children long after the age when she should have had a chaperone, and the Lord only knows what they did. When she was thirteen, fourteen, she used to sneak out to the Saturday night parties in the quarters, and she got so she could dance like any nigger. Now, I don't mean to be indelicate, but some of that dancing ain't proper for a white woman to look at, let alone do. And many a black girl has her first pickaninny when she's about that age."

"Your daddy let her run around too free," the major said.

"Major Kimbrough, sir, my daddy let us *both* run around too free. But the difference was in the blood. I played with colored children, too, but *I* soon learned that I was different."

"And you mean Dulcy never has?" Melanie asked.

"I guess she never has, 'cause she isn't," Amity said hopelessly. "Three years up north, and when she came

back, she hadn't changed in the slightest. Hadn't grown up a bit."

Mrs. Kimbrough shook her head sadly. "She always was a happy child."

"And she still acts like one. Still hangs around the kitchen with Irish and Vidette and my Leila, still wanders off and disappears with the colored. I suppose you heard about the trouble we had with our new houseboy a few weeks ago?"

The major nodded. "Your uncle said something about him getting insolent."

"That's right. He's an educated nigger, so educated he can quote you Tom Paine and Voltaire and all that rabble to hear Lucy tell it, and it just got too much for him. Uncle Joel had to take his hide off for good. And do you know what Dulcy done?"

"Nursed him herself, I heard," Melanie said.

"That's right. And I don't want to take her due from her. She nursed him as well as any white woman coulda done, and I do believe in taking care of our people, even when they earn themselves a whipping. But there are limits. You just don't sit up with a poor sick nigger night and day when it ain't—when the necessity no longer exists. A white woman can better spend her time elsewhere."

Melanie's eyes had a glitter. "Do you think there was . . . something between them?"

"Oh, lordy, I don't know. All I know is, like takes to like."

"It's the truth," the major said. "Sooner or later, blood shows. Don't know why, but black brings white down faster than white brings black up."

"But what's all this about Dulcy chopping cotton like a common field wench?" Mrs. Kimbrough asked.

"It came about like this. I told her, 'Dulcy, honey, you are spending altogether too much time with Jebediah and the other servants.' I told her, 'Now, you was brought up white, and everybody around here respects you like you was white. And if you want them to go on respecting you, you've got to *act* white.'"

"Certainly," Mrs. Kimbrough said. "Perfectly reasonable."

"But no matter how much I warned her, she kept right on doing as she pleased. Kept right on spending all that time with Jebediah, and when she wasn't doing that, sky-larking about like a little darky gal. Finally I remembered what Papa used to do when we were little. He'd tell her, 'You wanna act like a nigger, you gonna work like a nigger,' and he'd put a hoe in her hand and make her go out into a field with him for a day. So, being in charge while Uncle Joel's away, I decided to try the same thing. I said, 'You wanna act like a nigger, you gonna work like a nigger,' and I put a hoe in her hand. She just says, 'I don't care, I don't care!' and off she goes in the morning, happy as a lark."

"Do you mean to tell me," Melanie said, "that Dulcy's working out there because she *wants* to?"

Amity shrugged. "Ask her. She doesn't have to work in the fields, and she knows it. She can come in out of the fields any time she pleases. All she has to do is stop acting like an empty-headed kitchen wench, and start acting like the young white woman she was brought up to be. Black or not, she does bear the name of Sabre, and I don't care to see it disgraced."

"Well, I don't blame you one bit," Mrs. Kimbrough said. "I don't blame you at all."

It was established: Dulcy was black.

Amity was proud of the way she had told the story. Best of all, it was essentially true. Dulcy always *had* spent too much time with the darkies. She *did* spend too much time nursing Jebediah. She *could* come out of the fields anytime she wished. It seemed to her that she had hardly even stretched a point, and she felt more justified than ever in her actions.

"Poor Papa," she said as she prepared to leave. "I must admit that when I first found out about Dulcy, I blamed him. But now it seems to me that that woman—I never did think of her as my mother—it seems to me that she must have had him bewitched."

"Don't blame him too much," the major said. "Even Thomas Jefferson got his Sally Hemings—his own black

sister-in-law, at that. Your daddy's big mistake was in marrying her."

"But at least he didn't set her free, Major Kimbrough. And he didn't free poor Dulcy neither. I'm sure he had his reasons."

"Course he did. Your daddy always was too free and easy with his people, but he certainly wasn't a complete fool. Always liked your daddy."

Like Sabrehill, Kimbrough Hall was built with the piazza overlooking the river, and a central hall, or passage, led through the house to the visitors' entrance. The family walked with Amity through the house, and Quentin accompanied her outside to her carriage. Quentin, Amity noted with some pleasure, looked miserable.

"I swan, Quentin," she said cheerfully as he helped her into the carriage, "it seems like ages since you've visited our house. Gonna have to have your whole family over for dinner real soon, now."

Quentin looked as if he had some burning question which he was afraid to ask. She decided to make it easy for him.

"What is it, Quentin? Something troubling you, honey?"

"About Dulcy," he said. "You gonna just let her go on working in the fields?"

"Well, like I said, it's her choice."

Quentin shook his head. "It just don't seem right somehow. You ought to set her free."

"My papa didn't. I'm not certain that I should."

Quentin raised his troubled eyes and blurted out the words. "Then would you sell her? I've got some money. Would you sell her to me?"

Something like joy flowered in Amity's soul. Since Quentin's betrayal with Dulcy, she had been quite content to think of him as a pretty-faced nincompoop, but never would she have expected him to make an offer as foolish as this. She smiled.

"Why, Quentin, honey," she said softly, sweetly, "you couldn't expect me to sell my own sister."

At a touch of her fingers her driver took her away.

Most of her days were the same.

More often than not, she would awaken before dawn to Turnage's clawlike touch. He would want her immediately, and she would try to accommodate him, because she dared not do otherwise. But she had no dreams left to ease the way, and moments later he would be cursing her. "No goddam woman at all. . . . Christ, like a piece of leather. . . . Dried-up goddam old maid. . . ." Afterwards she would hurry as soon as possible to clean herself, following the instructions she had sought from Momma Lucinda. The thought of having a child by Turnage was unbearable.

She fetched his breakfast from the kitchen. Whenever possible she ate before or after him rather than with him. He asked about this a time or two and then ceased to notice. After he had left the house and set about his day's work, she breathed a sigh of relief and had her own breakfast. She felt that her "normal" life had resumed.

She didn't see him until sometime after one o'clock, when he generally returned for his midday meal. He was usually at his most amiable at this time, sometimes a completely different Mr. Turnage from the one she knew at dawn and in the evening. He spoke cheerfully to her, thanked her for his plate, even told her an occasional amusing story about his work day. He might even say, halfway to an apology, "Guess I was a sorta rough with you last night . . . drank a little too much maybe. You feeling all right?" She would nod and try to smile. Maybe everything would be all right. Maybe he would stop drinking and become more gentle. She clung to such hopes, knowing their futility, in order to keep going.

In the afternoon she had her own world back again for a few hours, but she could never completely escape Turnage. She bore his marks—the bruised cheeks, the split lips—and she was reminded of them by their reflection in the faces of others. Leila, Genevra, Vidette—they looked at her with pity, sometimes mixed with contempt. Why shouldn't Vidette have contempt for her—a Sabrehill lady allowing herself to be married to a man like that?

She never knew altogether what the evening would be like. He might come out of the fields in a sour mood or

a good one. He might drink heavily or lightly. He might make immediate sexual demands on her or—all too rarely—scorn her altogether. They had been married less than a week when, one evening after a couple of cups of whiskey, he laughed drunkenly and said, "Don't look so jumpy. I already had two pieces of black ass in the field this afternoon. What do I want you for?" Later he changed his mind. Unfortunately, he then proved impotent, which so infuriated him that he beat her senseless. The only thing certain of any evening was that it would end badly.

Whenever he had drunk enough, he invariably reverted to the same theme: How he had been cheated; how he had been tricked into marrying a "goddam dried-up nigger-fucking wife."

"Goddam Miss Amity . . . said you never did nothing with that nigger . . . lied, didn't she?"

"No, Mr. Turnage," she might answer faintly, "she did not lie."

"Said I'd get lotsa money. Lots'n lotsa money. Said I'd stay here forever, run Sabrehill, just her and me. Like I was the master of Sabrehill. Only she lied. Five thousand dollars and a goddam five-year contract. Said there'd be more, but I don't believe it. Lied."

Back to the jug for another cup of whiskey. Naked or half-naked most of the time, having laid her before becoming completely drunk. His face red in the lamplight, while he sipped whiskey, played with his limp flesh, and said it again and again and again: "Goddam dried-up nigger-fucking whore. . . . Goddam dried-up nigger-fucking whore. . . ."

Until, remembering Jebediah—clean, decent, gentle under the whip-hardened exterior—the inevitable thought arrived like thunder: *Oh, my sweet Jesus, why didn't I? Why didn't I even think of it? Why shouldn't I have made love to him? Why didn't I, when I still had a chance?*

"Christ, woman, what are you crying about now?"

On the evening of Dulcy's first day in the fields, Lucy knew she had to do something for the girl. Turnage thought the story was hilarious.

"So Hayden, he gives Zag the whip and says, 'Miss

Dulcy mighty obliged to you for taking her whipping, Zag, but she still got some coming to her if you want to give it.' Well, Miss Dulcy starts screaming something awful, but Zag don't hesitate. Damned if he don't give it to her across the back so hard he knocks her down. And while she's crawling there in the dirt, trying to get away, he goes after her. She's screaming her head off, and even back where I was, I could see he was using all his strength. Finally he gives her one hell of a good one right across that sweet ass of hers, and Hayden, he stops him." He shook his head. "I can tell you, that little nigger sister of yours ain't gonna walk straight for a week."

He took a drink of whiskey and added casually, "Sweet ass. I'm gonna have me some of that stuff one of these days."

She had to do something. And the only person she could think of who might be of help was Paul Devereau. It happened that Devereau visited Amity that very evening, but Lucy had no opportunity to speak to him, either alone or in the company of others. They had not said a word to each other in the two weeks since the wedding, though he had visited Sabrehill several times.

Paul Devereau, she learned the next morning, had made a few days' trip to Charleston, and it was a week before she got to speak to him—a week during which she saw Dulcy go off to the fields each morning, hoe in hand, and return in the evenings looking like a beaten child; a week that Turnage managed to make seem like a lifetime. On a Thursday afternoon, when Turnage had returned to the fields and Amity was somewhere out of sight, she took a roadcart from the coachhouse and drove to the Devereau plantation.

He received her in his library, and there was shock in his eyes when he saw her, though he tried to conceal it. She smiled. "Yes," she said, "I know I look badly. I suppose I should say nothing about it."

"You know you can say anything you please to me."

She wondered if he knew why she had married Turnage. She wondered what Amity had told him.

"Just tell me what I can do for Dulcy. You know what's happened?"

"I know."

"Do you know that she has actually been beaten? Whipped?"

Devereau hesitated. "No. I did not know that."

"She has no business working in the fields. I have to get her back to the house where she belongs."

"Lucy, please sit down."

He made her comfortable in a big chair and poured wine for both of them. She waited hopefully as he settled himself into a chair facing her and leaned forward, elbows on knees. His heavy-browed eyes were grave.

"Now, there's a matter or two which you must understand and accept," he said. "One is that your sister Amity is your uncle's factotum in his absence. There is no doubt that she manages Sabrehill and will do so until his return. Ordinarily, the overseer would perform this function, but evidently your uncle either lacks confidence in Mr. Turnage—if you'll excuse my saying so—or he has special confidence in Miss Amity. He has even given her written authorization to act in his stead. It's the next thing to his power-of-attorney."

"You're telling me there is nothing I can do."

"Not at all. You can employ moral suasion, and I'm sure you can do so strongly."

"With Amity, Paul?" Surely he knew Amity better than that.

He ignored her. "The second matter which you must understand is that *Dulcy truly is a chattel*. We have known this for years, but I don't think you've ever really accepted the fact."

"But it wasn't meant to be!"

"That is irrelevant. It is a fact. And it will remain a fact until Dulcy is manumitted." He said the words slowly and distinctly: "She . . . is . . . a slave. And as a slave, she can be worked and disciplined as her owner sees fit."

He looked seriously at her for a long moment, as if to drive his points home. Then, suddenly, he sat back in his chair, smiling.

"But, Lucy, let's be realistic. Is all this so important?"

Dulcy's to be freed in a couple of months, and then she'll go up north. Isn't that right?"

"Yes."

"And meanwhile, is she really so badly off? Sabrehill is notorious for its lack of discipline, and I can't conceive of Mr. Turnage allowing any of his foremen to abuse Dulcy."

"She's been whipped," Lucy said dully.

"Yes, and I can remember you young ladies as children being switched until you had welts worse than I give any of my people. I have personally seen Momma Lucinda switch little Dulcy until she howled. Now, don't tell me that a stripe or two in the fields is worse than that."

Lucy understood now. Where the power was, there was Paul Devereau. His fortunes depended on Sabrehill, and when he had thought she might become Sabrehill's mistress, he had courted her. But now she was married to Mr. Turnage, and his fortunes would one day depend on Amity. He stood with Amity.

"Thank you," she said. "I must go now."

He conducted her back to her roadcart without urging her to stay longer. But at the last moment, as if to make amends, he said, "Lucy, I never interfere in marital affairs unless I'm asked, but if there's anything I can do . . ."

She shook her head and rode off.

Oddly, the impossibility of doing anything for Dulcy convinced her of the hopelessness of her own situation. For all the past weeks, she had tried to tell herself that Turnage would change, that he would forget her, that he would learn to ignore her. She had clung to a dimly felt hope, a sense that, because things *could not* continue as they were, they would not. Something would happen to cause a change. Something would happen to Mr. Turnage. Somehow, sometime, there would definitely be a change for the better.

But now she knew there never would be.

This was her life, the way she would pass her days until death, the life that had come to her in her twenty-

ninth year. This was her fate; this was what she had been born for. To be the wife of an ignorant, abusive overseer. To be Turnage's wife. To be his chattel.

His slave.

The day was eye-stingingly, shatteringly bright, heat waves rising from the long green rows and the gravel road, mirages brilliantly blue in the distance ahead. Yet she felt as if she were driving down a long dark tunnel, and she would continue down it for the rest of her days. This was her life. And it was endless.

She took a back road to Sabrehill and left the roadcart and horse between the coachhouse and the stable. She was approaching the overseer's house by the east service lane when she heard the scream, and her first thought was, *Oh, my God—Dulcy!*

But it wasn't Dulcy she saw through the bedroom window. It was a young black girl from the field quarters, little more than a child, rolling naked on the bed, trying to escape from the half-dressed Turnage. When the girl cried out again, Turnage struck her with all his strength.

It was too much. Not a child, in her house, on her own bed. It was not going to happen. Not now, not ever again. She had the feeling that she might end it all—*everything*—right now.

She had no idea of what she intended to do when she entered the house. Her mind seemed frozen. She went quickly yet unhurriedly through the front room. In the bedroom she tried to grab Turnage's shoulders and pull him away from the girl. Turnage whirled and swung an arm that caught her across the upper chest and knocked her back against the wall. He had been drinking; his eyes were blank, as if he didn't know her. He turned to the girl again, and Lucy saw the knife in its sheath on his hip.

She had seen it often without realizing it; she could not have told anyone that it was there. Yet it presented itself to her now like a gift that had been meant for her all along, and she accepted it. Without a thought of what she was doing, she slipped it from its sheath, holding it like a carving knife, and pulled back her elbow to plunge the blade into Turnage's back.

But he had felt the knife come free of the sheath. Again

he whirled, and as the blade lanced forward, the fingers of his left hand encircled her right hand like a trap. She tried to move, tried to stab again, but it was as if he had paralyzed her. He grinned.

"You'd cut me, would you? You'd cut me with my own knife?"

She couldn't have released the knife if she had wanted to. She couldn't even transfer it to her other hand, his fingers held hers so firmly and painfully. When she tried to tear away from him, he swung her around and threw her onto the bed, her legs hanging over the side. She had a fleeting vision of the black girl grabbing her shift and running from the room, and then Turnage was driving her thighs apart with his knees and pinning her with his body.

"You wanna cut somebody, do you? You wanna cut with this knife?"

His face twisted over hers with an angry grin; she couldn't have said if his eyes held anger or glee.

He was holding her knife hand at a distance from both of them. She fought him as he brought it closer until it glittered inches from their faces. Then, easily, he turned her wrist so that the edge was toward her face, and she realized what he was going to do.

"Wanna cut, do you?"

"No—no, please!"

She strained away from the blade, but it followed her. In a frenzy she moved her head from side to side, but the cutting edge was everywhere. She cried out, squealed, begged, but the edge came closer, touched her, touched her again. She begged and couldn't help begging and didn't care—she had to get away from that knife. But Turnage, laughing now, brought it ever closer.

He stopped laughing. Her head was turned as far to the left as she could get it, and the edge was against her right cheek.

"Cut me, will you . . ."

She felt the even steady slice from temple through cheek to jawbone, knowing her face would never be the same again.

But Turnage's laughter began again, the same as be-

fore, always the same. He took the knife from her hand and threw it across the room. Then, tearing at her clothes, he finished with her what he had started with the slave girl.

And it will never end, she thought. It will never ever end.

He leaned against his crutches in the kitchen, watching Momma Lucinda bind up Lucy's head, almost concealing her face in the crimson-stained rounds of white cloth. He thought of the long hot welts on Dulcy's back. His anger was like a sullen coal glowing with new life as someone blew away the ashes.

Twelve

A hundred years seemed to have passed since those last moments with Quentin in the darkness of the gazebo.

"I got me my hello kiss, and now it's time to kiss good-bye."

"Oh, no."

"Oh, yes."

Then the kiss, the fire, the mindless reeling, and Quentin sobbing, *"Oh, Christ, I can't lose you. Dulcy, I have got to have you."*

A hundred years had passed, but still the episode returned to haunt her. She had told Quentin that because of Amity she would have nothing more to do with him—hoping, even as she said it, that someday he would make her break her vow. But in the hundred years since then, so much had happened—her secret had been found out, her father had died, her sister had been forced to marry—and she had seen Quentin, briefly, only at the funeral and the wedding. And the ironic thing was that Amity no longer seemed to be interested in Quentin. Since Lucy's

wedding, she appeared to be much more interested in Mr. Paul Devereau.

Dulcy dreamed of Quentin, then, taking comfort in the dream. He would stay away for weeks, or even months, but one day he would return. He would come as he had on that June morning long ago, on his high-stepping mount, his flaring white collar framing his handsome face, his black holster, saddle, and boots gleaming. He would spring down from his horse and take her into his arms, and all the excitement of those moments in the gazebo would be repeated. Then, lifting her into the saddle with him, he would carry her off to a faraway mansion—Kimbrough Hall?—and there he would carry her cradled in his arms up winding flights of stairs, through a doorway, and into a room where a canopied bed awaited. . . .

Each night, before sleeping, she had the dream. Each morning she returned to the fields.

After the first day, she was whipped, but, for the most part, not too badly. On her second day in the fields, Hayden himself gave her a stripe across the rump, which the other field hands thought a joke. On the third day, a Saturday, he forced Zag to give her a couple of half-hearted lashes. The onlookers found the incident shocking, but it helped accustom them to the idea that Miss Dulcy, too, could be punished by the whip. Sunday gave her a chance to regain her strength, and Monday was hell again. Tuesday was better.

She soon came to understand Amity's strategy. She was to be treated as a field hand and to be made as miserable as a field hand could be—but not to such an extent that she would give up seeing Jeb in order to stay out of the fields. Since she had no intention of foregoing her visits to Jeb, she and Amity were in a sense collaborators.

But she did fight back. She sensed Hayden's reluctance to deal too harshly with her, and she took full advantage of it. She said things that the other hands would never have dared, things that made them laugh at Hayden.

"Hey, you dang fool," she yelled. "You too dumb to use a hoe or just too lazy? Is that why you're a fore-

man, Hayden—because you're stupid and lazy? . . .

"Watch out, everybody, here comes our stupid friend! Go ahead, use that whip on me—if you're too dumb to know that I'm going to give you three stripes for every one you give me. . . .

"Hey, gooberhead, I think I'll give you three stripes for every one you give Zag, too. Hey, gooberhead, don't go away! . . ."

In her pain and anger, she began to say things she had heard in the quarters, expressions which she, as a young white lady, would never have dreamed of using. *No*, she thought, *I'm certainly no lady anymore if I ever was one . . . no lady at all. . . .* And Hayden, stunned by the first insults, began looking at her with a growing, brooding hatred.

The campaign of insult reached its climax on Thursday morning, a week after she had first gone out to the fields. By that time she felt as if she had spent half of her life with a hoe in her hand. Though she had toughened, her face and arms were raw and peeling, her body was sticky with dirt and sweat, and she throbbed with fatigue. The end of the day seemed a thousand years away.

She had no idea of what she was going to say when Hayden came by. She opened her mouth and heard the vicious words coming out: "Hayden, is it true what they say about you in the quarters? Is it true that you're no good for a woman, Hayden? Is it true that you can't do it, that the only thing you can give a woman is that whip in your hand? Is it true that you've got nothing in your pants worth having—"

She broke off, hardly believing she could have said such a thing, when Hayden whirled on her his whip raised. There was hidden laughter around them, laughter choked back.

"Well, Hayden?" she said coolly.

She fully expected him to bring the whip down on her shoulders, to whip her so hard she would be incapacitated for at least the rest of the day. She hardly cared. And she let the driver see how little she cared.

Twice she saw his hand jerk; twice he nearly brought

the whip down on her. Then he whirled away from her, the whip sang through the air, and a young hand nearby, a boy, screamed with pain. Hayden raised the whip again, and the next stroke knocked the boy down. Before he could bring the whip down a third time, Dulcy sprang through the air and clawed it from his hand.

Before she could use it, Hayden backed away from her. The hatred in his eyes had now turned into a kind of shock.

"Now everybody in this field knows about you, don't they, Hayden?" she said. "They know I dare call you anything I want, and you ain't got the guts to stripe me for it. They know you ain't got the guts of a little nigger gal, Hayden."

They stood poised, looking directly at each other, frozen in the hatred of the moment. This was the way Jebediah must have felt sometimes, Dulcy thought. Yes, now she was beginning to understand.

She felt Zag gently taking the whip from her hand. "Please, Miss Dulcy," he said quietly. "You just gon' get somebody killed. Maybe yourself."

He threw the whip on the ground at Hayden's feet. She and Hayden continued to look at each other for a moment, until his gaze dropped and he slowly picked up the whip. When he didn't look at her again, she went back to her row and picked up her hoe. The field was quiet.

She worked steadily, saying nothing. There was no singing that day. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Hayden moving away, and a little later she saw him conferring with Mr. Turnage at the edge of the field. They looked at her, looked away again. Nodded and parted.

Whip in hand, Mr. Turnage walked slowly around the field, then along her row toward her. She didn't look up until he was beside her. When he spoke, he kept his voice low, as if not wishing the other hands to hear.

"Now, Miss Dulcy, you got to stop making trouble for poor old Hayden. He's got work to do here, and you're—"

"Maybe you'd like to use that whip on me, Mr. Turnage." She spoke loud enough to be heard by the other hands.

"You're making it so I just about got to."

She lowered her voice only a little. "Do you have any idea of why I'm out here, Mr. Turnage?"

"You're here because Miss Amity put you here."

"Is that what she told you?"

"Miss Dulcy—"

"Has it ever occurred to you, Mr. Turnage, that my sister Amity is not the most intelligent female in the world?"

Obviously it had never occurred to Mr. Turnage that anyone might consider Amity Sabre to be less than bright. A deep unease suddenly showed in his eyes.

"All I know," he said hesitantly, "is that she is where she is . . . and you are where you are."

"And you are where you are, Mr. Turnage. Which means that you had better not make any mistakes. Because you'll pay for them."

"I only do like I'm told."

Dulcy shook her head. "Makes no difference. If you know Miss Amity at all, Mr. Turnage, you know she's not going to pay for anything you do—not even if she orders you to do it. You pay, Mr. Turnage. You pay."

Mr. Turnage nervously caressed the handle of his whip. Chewed his mustache with his lower teeth. And having considered the matter, shook his head and sighed.

"Like I said, I only do like I'm told."

Before Dulcy realized his intention, the overseer turned and shot his whip out across the shoulders of a nearby field hand. The hand gasped and glared angrily at Mr. Turnage.

"You!" Mr. Turnage said. "Don't you look at me like that. Move that hoe faster. And see that Miss Dulcy here does a good job. And does it nice and quiet."

He turned back to Dulcy. "Now, if you want me to lay this whip across you too, Miss Dulcy, I'll do it. But if you make any more trouble out here, other people are going to get punished first for letting you do it. I thought you understood that."

She understood. It was the same tactic that had been used on her first day in the fields, but it would be used more relentlessly now. And since she could not ask others to take whippings for her, there was no way she could win any battle against Mr. Turnage and his drivers.

But, even so, she was not quite through with the overseer.

"Mr. Turnage," she said, "apparently my sister did not explain to you that I'm out here, in part, of my own free will. It's a kind of bargain Miss Amity and I have struck, and I can leave anytime I wish."

Mr. Turnage made a gesture of dismissal. "I don't know anything about that."

"Then I think you had better listen. I don't know what you've been told, but you seem to be under the impression that I'm just another field hand. I am not. I am still Miss Dulcy Sabre of Sabrehill, a fact that you would do well to bear in mind."

"All I know is—"

"I'm not finished. I was about to say that I'm glad I've come out here and seen how you work our hands, because I think my Uncle Joel should know more about your methods. I know he likes you personally, Mr. Turnage, but I don't think he's going to approve of your latest methods one bit. In fact, I think he's going to be very, very angry."

"Miss Amity said—"

"Miss Amity is not Sabrehill's overseer. And I told you, Miss Amity does not pay for other people's mistakes. Hasn't she used you enough?"

For an instant she thought she had gone too far. An angry look came to Mr. Turnage's eyes, and his hand tightened on his whip. But she had been speaking with a quiet authority which she herself had never known she possessed, and it had disturbed the overseer. No doubt Amity had given him the impression that she was helpless, a pure victim, one more slave to be bullied into knowing her place. But she was not talking like a victim or a slave, and he was confused.

"Now, have you something to say, Mr. Turnage?"

The overseer snapped his whip. He wanted to use it, but for the moment he felt deprived of a victim. "Far as I'm concerned," he said, "you can leave here anytime you want, just like you said. But if you stay, you're gonna let Hayden and the others do their work, and don't cause no trouble."

He walked off.

Dulcy had no illusion that she had won out over the overseer. He would report back to Amity, and she would shore up his confidence and his faith in her. But meanwhile, at least she had worried him, and perhaps he would keep Hayden away for the rest of the day.

He did. They saw no more of Hayden that day. But that evening when she went to the kitchen, she found Lucy with her face in bandages, and Dulcy wondered miserably if Mr. Turnage would have done such a thing if she had not spoken up to him.

The next day, Friday, was another day in hell. On Saturday afternoon Quentin Kimbrough appeared.

It was, literally, a dream come true. At one moment she was bent over her hoe, her back in agony, her dirt-stained legs shaking with fatigue, her eyes blinded by sweat. Hayden was merciless now, intent on getting some vengeance for the humiliation she had given him, and she was afraid to stop working even for an instant. In the next moment, some movement at the edge of a nearby patch of woods caused her to look up, and there was Quentin. Just as she had dreamed, he was on his horse, and she knew that their meeting was no accident. He had come seeking her.

Dropping her hoe, she called his name and ran toward him. She heard Hayden yell at her, but she paid no attention. Quentin dismounted and hurried to meet her at the edge of the field, and they fell into each other's arms. When he spoke, his voice was thick with emotion.

"Couldn't stay away no longer. . . . Came looking for you. . . . Couldn't help myself."

In that moment, if they had been alone, he could have taken her. There would have been no need to wait until he had carried her off. She loved the sight of him, the smell of his body, the rough hands that were handling her through her thin shift, and, if only they had been alone, she would have wanted him to tear off the shift and take her, then and there, at the field's edge. She loved him, and she would have given herself as freely as Isa had given herself to Wayland on that spring afternoon so long ago.

"Amity told us what happened. Came to dinner last

Sunday and told us. Dulcy, honey, I just couldn't believe it."

Quentin sounded as if he wanted to weep, and Dulcy put a finger to his lips. "Now, don't you fret. I'm going to be all right."

"Honey, you got to make your peace with Amity. It ain't right for you—"

He broke off, and Dulcy saw that he was looking over her shoulder. She followed his gaze and found Hayden standing a few feet away.

"You want something, boy?" Quentin asked angrily.

Hayden waved his whip toward Dulcy. "She s'posed to work."

"You just get yourself away from here, boy. Go on, get."

"She s'posed to work," Hayden repeated sullenly.

Quentin gently put Dulcy aside and stepped toward Hayden. "You are talking to a white man, nigger. Do you know how to say *sir*?"

"Yes, sir."

"Yes, sir, master, sir."

"Yes, sir, master, sir."

"I told you to get—now, God damn it, *get*!"

Hayden looked at Quentin for a moment. When he finally said, "Yes, sir, master, sir," his voice barely concealed contempt. He turned and walked back toward the field.

"He looks like a mean one," Quentin said. "He been giving you a hard time?"

"Hayden gives everyone a hard time."

He took her hands. "Well, that makes a good driver, but the idea of him messing around with you . . ."

"Don't worry about me, Quentin. In a couple of months I'll be free. Then we can forget all about this."

Quentin shook his head. "Amity talked like you almost liked working in the fields."

"No." Dulcy's laugh was a little hysterical. "No, I can't say I really do."

"Of course you don't. And I've been worried sick about you ever since I heard, trying to think of some way I

could help you. Do you know I even told Amity I'd buy you?"

"Buy my freedom?"

"Anything to get you out of the fields."

Then carry me off, she thought, leaning against his shoulder and smiling. *Carry me off.*

"God damn!" Quentin exploded, and looking around, she saw why. Hayden was getting his revenge—punishing her by punishing the others. He kept raising the whip and bringing it down on one pair of shoulders after another, and it was obvious that he was doing it quite indiscriminately. Any pair of shoulders would do. The whip came down again and again, as fast as Hayden could use it, amid howls of pain.

Quentin raced into the field, and Dulcy hurried after him. He ran to Hayden and yanked the whip out of his hand.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, boy? You want me to use this whip on you?"

Hayden's eyes widened. "This is Sabrehill, master, sir," he said. "I do like I'm told."

"Somebody told you to abuse your hands?"

"I do like I'm told," Hayden repeated.

"I ever hear from Miss Dulcy you do that again, I'll flay you alive."

"I don't work for you, master, sir. This here is Sabrehill."

The insolence was too much for Quentin. He already held the whip reversed in his hand, and he laid the butt against the side of Hayden's head. Hayden dropped like dead meat, crashing through a couple of rows of cotton. Quentin again reversed the handle and raised the whip over his head.

"No!" Dulcy grabbed Quentin's arm. "Don't, please!"

"This boy needs whipping."

"Yes, but don't you see? After you've left, it'll be worse than ever for the people here!"

"It had better not be," Quentin said, but he slowly lowered the whip nevertheless. "You just remember, boy, if I hear you abused these people, I'm gonna flay you

alive. Even if I have to buy you to do it. Remember, Mr. Quentin Kimbrough told you."

He dropped the whip at Hayden's feet and walked back toward his horse. Dulcy followed, thinking, *Carry me off! Don't leave me with Hayden after this! Carry me off!*

When they reached his horse, it was almost as if he had heard and was answering her silent pleading. He looked at her with painfilled eyes and slowly shook his head.

"I'm sorry, Dulcy," he said. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened. You know, I really could have loved you."

He hauled himself up into his saddle. He looked down at her, as if for the last time, and again shook his head.

"If only," he said bitterly, angrily, as if it were her fault, "you hadn't turned out to be a damned nigger."

Without another word or a backward glance, he rode slowly away.

And Dulcy Sabre, gazing after him, for the first time in her life truly understood what it was to be a nigger.

On a Saturday night two months after they had first met, Jeb Hayes and Dulcy Sabre made love for the first time.

All the late afternoon and evening he had waited for her. Again and again he had walked to his door and looked out across the courtyard, and there had been no sign of Dulcy. He had worried that something had happened to her, but he had been afraid to ask Momma Lucinda or anyone else, afraid even of going to her house and possibly intruding on her. It was possible that the hard labor and the whips had broken her and that she was avoiding him in order not to have to return to the fields. He wouldn't have blamed her in the slightest, but suddenly he found that he missed her terribly.

The minute he saw her outside his door and heard her say, "Good evening, Jebediah," he knew there was to be something special about the night. There was a glow in her eyes and a throatiness in her voice that hadn't been there before. Usually in the evenings she changed to one

of her "big house dresses." Tonight she merely wore a clean shift. *Like any other field hand*, he thought.

"Come, Jebediah," she said, taking his hand. "We're already late."

They attended a party in the field quarters. On most Saturday evenings there was some kind of entertainment in the quarters, small parties in different cabins or a larger one in the square. On this night the weather was good, and everyone was in the square—talking, drinking, flirting, dancing to the fiddle and drums. Jeb noticed a subtle alteration in the common attitude toward Dulcy. She was no longer the privileged white child from the big house. On the other hand, she couldn't be dismissed with the contempt usually accorded to the fallen—she had shown herself to be too strong, too defiant. She might be a slave, but even if she lived to be a gray-haired old lady in the spinning house, she would still be *Miss Dulcy*.

And this was the girl Leila had called childish, Jeb thought wonderingly.

She chattered, sang, danced for an hour. As a house servant, Jeb had never learned to dance as well as she did, ironically enough, and with his bad foot and leg he couldn't even try. Dulcy danced either with Irish or alone. But Jeb was aware that every movement she made was for him . . . suggesting . . . inviting . . . daring. . . .

After an hour, they left. Dulcy led the way, following a lengthy route around the front of the mansion that took them, not to his quarters, but to hers. It was very unlikely that Miss Amity or Mr. Turnage or anyone else had seen them arrive at the house together. The night, if they wished, was theirs.

They entered the dark house, and she locked the door behind them. He found that he was oddly frightened, frightened as he was with no other woman. It had nothing to do with the fear of castration or the fact that she was white . . . if that was what she was. It had purely to do with the fact that she was . . . Dulcy.

She led the way into the bedroom. When she lit a lamp, her eyes seemed larger and darker than he had ever seen them. She came to him and reached up to touch his face,

her fingertips moving delicately over the whip blaze and the crooked nose.

"Not so pretty anymore," he said.

She said, "You're beautiful."

He had to ask the question that had bothered him all evening. She had made him wait for her, had come to him so much later than usual, and now this was happening. He had to know why.

"Dulcy-child, what happened to you while you were out there today?"

Her head fell forward against his chest, and he felt her warm breath. "Never mind about that now," she said. "The only thing that matters now is if you care for me at all."

He stroked her hair and remembered his vow never to love until he was free. It seemed so distant now—so distant and useless.

"I care," he said. "For you more than for anyone else."

She raised her face again, and behind the hazy desire in her eyes, there was delight. "Really, Jebediah? You really do?"

"I care," he repeated. "You must know."

She laughed and shook her head. "No. No, I didn't. I just hoped you might care a little. Because you're so special to me, more special than I knew. I only realized today why I was so jealous of Leila. Because it should have been me that you . . . Oh, Jebediah. . . ."

She whispered something more; he couldn't make out the words. But the words didn't matter. He lifted her, cradled her in his arms, and carried her to the bed.

"It was everything I ever dreamed of."

"Then you were very lucky," he said, not really believing her.

She lay naked against him, fondling him as if she owned him. He felt better than he had in weeks—catlike, masterful, victorious.

She said, "I was frightened at first. I didn't expect to be frightened, but I was."

"Of course."

"But did you like it? Am I any good?"

"Miss Dulcy, you are marvelous."

"Good. Then you'll want to do it again. And now that I've finally started, I really think we should do it all we can."

They laughed quietly, and he stroked her hair. "I applaud your enthusiasm," he said, "but you must be careful. I don't think you're quite ready for pickaninnies."

"Mr. Turnage said you can't have any."

"Mr. Turnage may be right, but Mr. Turnage is a very ignorant man."

"Anyway, with you I don't think I'd mind. . . . Jebediah?"

"Yes?"

"You really do care for me?"

"Yes."

"Then . . . you won't do it with anyone else, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to," he said seriously.

"I don't want you to."

He kissed her.

"And now, Dulcy-child," he said, "the time has come. Tell me what happened today."

She was reluctant, but she did finally tell him. "First," she said, "I have to explain something to you. Maybe you'll think I'm naughty, but I've been waiting a long time to . . . well, to do it."

"I understand."

"I never thought the first time would be just like this, but . . . that doesn't matter. I thought a lot about it. I dreamed about it. I dreamed about doing it with someone very special to me, and I kept looking for that someone special. Now, I know some people think that's wicked, but I couldn't help it. It's the way I am."

"You're not wicked, Dulcy-child."

"Finally I thought I'd found someone. There are lots of reasons I should have known better, but I didn't. I didn't *want* to know better. And today I saw him and talked to him for the first time in weeks. He came riding out to the edge of the field, and I went running to him like a fool."

"And what happened?"

Dulcy sat up on the bed. She sighed as if bored with her story. "Oh, you know what happened. He was so sympathetic, butter wouldn't melt in his mouth. Then, just as he was leaving, he said something that made me feel like I didn't even exist anymore. Not to him, not to God, maybe not even to myself. It was like he was grieving for someone who was dead, and I—I, who was left—I was no more important than a cotton seed or the hoe in my hand. God may see every sparrow fall, but he doesn't see me. . . . And I guess not you either."

Jeb ran his hand over the welts on Dulcy's white back, angry red ridges in the lamplight. "And so," he said sadly, "you came in out of the fields and found yourself a nigger lover."

"No!" Dulcy looked around at him angrily. "Oh, I admit I felt sorry for myself for a while. But the more I thought about it, the more I got mad. Not at that boy—at *me*! Most of my life I've been told what would most likely happen when people found out about me. And I've heard for years how that boy talks about black people. And yet I pretended it might not matter to him. I pretended he was something he wasn't, just because he looks so good in a pair of tight pants. All afternoon I've been hearing my papa shout in my ear, 'Damn it, girl—grow up!'"

Jeb smiled. "And what makes me, suddenly, so special?"

"Not suddenly." She leaned toward him, her ivory breast heavy on his brown chest, her hand tender on him. "Special from the very first. Don't you remember how I wanted you to come to work in the house? And how I took care of you, and how mad I was because you showed Leila you could still pleasure? Instead of *me*, Jebediah, instead of *me*! All the time, I wanted you! Oh, Jebediah, when we get up north . . ."

She began telling him of the glories of their time in the North, but he still couldn't believe he would ever go there with her or that he would ever be free. No, that dream was dead for him, and to try to resurrect it would be too painful. He could only keep silent and listen to her dreaming and try not to spoil it for her. Perhaps somehow he could even help to make her dream come true.

The next afternoon, Miss Amity sent for him. At the time, he was in the laundry yard behind the wash house with Dulcy, helping her spread out some field clothes to dry. Irish appeared and said that Miss Amity wanted him in the office at once. He and Dulcy looked at each other, having an idea of what the summons meant. He tried to smile reassuringly. "Don't worry. It had to happen sooner or later. It'll be all right."

It was odd, he thought as he walked toward the office. Miss Amity had tried to manipulate him into marriage with Leila, and she had very nearly gotten him castrated and killed. And yet, of the Sabre sisters, he knew her least. She was someone who, weeks ago, had given him an occasional order in the big house. A stranger who had once yelled "*Cut him! Cut him!*" over his torn and naked body. Nothing more.

She was sitting at her desk when he reached the office, and at her invitation he stepped into the room. His impression of her, before he let his gaze drop, was exactly the same as on the first day he saw her. Blond and perhaps beautiful. Soft, except for the blue-gray eyes. Arrogant, with the ability to make him feel like an object or an animal. Her smile was mocking but not really unfriendly.

"Well, you got here fast enough. Guess you must be feeling better."

"Yes, ma'am." Jeb kept his head hanging, his eyes on the floor. He was the abject slave now, and he knew how to play the role.

"Foot bones all healed? Ribs? Leg?"

"Momma Lucinda says another two weeks or so. And then it'll be a while before I get my full strength back."

"Well, if you got the strength to walk to the kitchen and tote food to your mouth, I reckon you can do something to earn the food, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"My own feeling is that too many niggers around here don't have enough to do. Leila, Vidette, Irish, all the house people—when they're not working at the house, they ought to be in the fields. They are on lots of other

plantations, and they ought to be here. What do you think, Jeb?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She laughed. "You sure ain't—you aren't the snotty nigger we used to have around the house. Are you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Well, that's just fine. Jebediah, I been thinking what to do about you, and I think I know. You like Miss—you like Dulcy pretty well, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I guess she likes you, the way she hangs around you. It must be true that Mr. Turnage didn't ruin you after all. That right, Jebediah?"

"I guess she likes me, ma'am," he said hesitantly. He wondered if she knew about last night.

"Sure, she does. She'd even rather chop cotton than stay away from you. The only trouble is, she's not much good in the fields. Always getting herself or somebody else whipped. Now, what I'd like to know is, how'd you like to help her out."

"I don't know what you mean, ma'am."

"Why, it's simple enough. Neither of you is up to doing a day's work on your own, but together you ought to be about as good as one full hand. So if you'd like to stop Dulcy from getting whipped so much, all you got to do is go out and work with her. Stay with her all the time, the next few weeks. And I'll tell Mr. Turnage that as long as neither of you makes trouble, he's to go real easy with the whip. How'd you like that, Jebediah."

He thought he saw her plan: she wanted to degrade Dulcy further in her uncle's eyes. He and Dulcy were already together every evening; she would see to it that they were together during the day as well. They would be such constant companions that there could be no doubt of their relationship. She was using him against Dulcy as she had used him against Lucy. Only this time it wouldn't be a case of a black man touching a white woman, he thought bitterly—it would just be a couple of niggers fucking.

And this time it would be true.

But what could he do about it? She could order them into the fields together. She could have them whipped

whether they were together or apart. She was merely saying that she would make life a little easier for Dulcy and him if they didn't resist her plans for them.

He looked at the whip hanging on the wall. She literally had the whip hand.

"Well, Jebediah?"

"I'll do my best, ma'am."

"Good. Then it's settled. You'll go out with Dulcy in the morning."

"Yes, ma'am."

He turned to leave.

"Oh, don't go yet."

When he looked at Miss Amity again, she had an odd little smile on her face and a special light in her eyes. Licking the corner of her mouth, she glanced around as if to make quite sure they were alone, and she spoke in a lowered voice.

"Jebediah, it is true, isn't it, that when Mr. Turnage kicked you, he didn't ruin you after all?"

Jeb lowered his eyes again. "I'd rather not talk about it, ma'am."

She laughed. "No, I guess not. Anyway, Irish heard it from Leila, and I guess she'd know. You were a fool, Jebediah, you know that? You could have married Leila and spread her every night and worked in a big house the rest of your life. What's the matter, didn't you like doing it with Leila?"

He didn't want to answer. He tried to think what he could say.

"Come on," Miss Amity wheedled, "you can tell me. Isn't it good with Leila?"

The room seemed terribly hot. He put his hand to his brow and shook his head.

"Can't be you mean *no*." Miss Amity lowered her voice still more. "Why, she told me a long time ago that you were the best she ever had, Jebediah. The very best she ever had! Do you mean to tell me she wasn't the best for you too?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I don't know—"

"What do you mean, you don't know? Tell me."

"Please, ma'am—"

"Just tell me the truth—*do you like . . .*" Her voice was suddenly loud again and so harsh—with what? anger? lust?—that it startled him, and his mind blotted out the brutal words.

"*Well, do you?*"

"Yes, ma'am," he whispered.

He could hear her breathing. "Hope Mr. Turnage is wrong about killing the seed. Ought to breed you. Like to see what we could get out of Leila by you. Or out of Dulcy. Go on, get out of here, now."

He bolted from the office.

He smiled as he approached her in the laundry yard, hoping to reassure her, but still Dulcy looked worried.

"She's putting you back to work again?"

"Yes, but it's going to be different this time. For the next few weeks I'm to work with you. And together, we're only supposed to do the work of one hand. That's all. And she said she'd tell Mr. Turnage not to use the whip so much."

Dulcy shook her head unbelievably. "That doesn't sound like Amity."

"It's true. I'm not saying it'll be easy from now on, but maybe it will be better. We'll see." He hugged her with one arm and didn't care who saw them. What difference could it make now?

"What would you like to do the rest of the afternoon?" he asked.

She gazed off into the distance, trying to decide. Out near the kitchen garden, a young couple was cultivating their own plot. Wayland and Isa, Jeb thought they were called.

Smiling, Dulcy turned to him again. "I know a place to swim," she said. "A stream in the woods where almost nobody goes. . . ."

Thirteen

First light. As Jeb and Dulcy entered the field-quarters square, the hands were already gathering, the driver going from cabin to cabin to make sure that all had turned out. It was all so familiar to Jeb. Less than three months before, he had been released from the fields, and within a day their memory had started to fade like a nightmare he could not bear. But now, already, it was as if he had never been away.

But perhaps it would not be too bad. Miss Amity had promised that it would not. He clung to that.

Dulcy led the way toward Hayden's gang, but before they got there, Turnage saw them and stepped into their path. He caressed the butt of his whip almost lovingly, it seemed to Jeb. His mouth twitched under his mustache as if he were trying to smile.

"Well, Miss Dulcy," he said in his oily twang, "I hear you gonna have yourself a helper."

Dulcy, unsmiling, looked directly at, or through, Turnage, and Jeb was reminded of the way her father had

looked at the man on the day of his capture and return to Sabrehill.

"Miss Amity told me all about it," Turnage went on, when there was no reply. "Gonna make things easy for you and Jeb here the next couple of weeks or so, till Jeb gets his strength back." He touched Jeb's chest with the coiled whip. "Ain't that right, Jeb? Gonna have it real easy, boy?"

Jeb looked at the ground. "I don't know, sir."

"Well, you're gonna find out how easy. Want to talk to you alone a minute."

Turnage sent Dulcy on to Hayden's gang and drew Jeb aside from the other slaves. Jeb kept his eyes carefully down.

"Jeb, you remember what I told you when I caught you and brought you back?"

"Yes, sir."

"Told you that if you work for me, you're *my* nigger. Told you that if you so much as give me a bad look, I'd whip you into your grave. Remember that?"

"Yes, sir."

"And remember what I told you when you went to work in the big house?"

"Yes, sir."

"Told you that if I got hold of you again, you'd find it hell, didn't I?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I've got you again, Jeb. You're my nigger now. And if you give me any trouble, even a bad look, I purely don't give a damn what Miss Amity or anyone else says—I'm gonna have your ass. Before, you only got a taste of what you're gonna get. Next time I'll break both your feet, and I'll take your balls off myself. You understand me?"

"Yes, sir."

The overseer was quiet. Jeb had a feeling that the man was disappointed at the lack of reaction. But that was all right. Jeb's intention now was to be as uninteresting as possible. He would gradually slip into the speech of a field hand. He would become invisible.

"All right, get over there with Miss Dulcy."

The day turned out to be not at all bad. In fact, it was as easy a day as Jeb had ever had as a field hand. It was late enough in the season that the fields had been well picked over for weeds—as Dulcy said, it was almost as if they had suddenly disappeared. Still, they could be found, and Jeb soon felt the strain of going up and down the rows.

He received two stripes from Hayden in the afternoon. Hayden said, "You slacking," and the whip bit in twice, not too badly. Dulcy glared but said nothing, fearing to make matters worse. Jeb knew that the stripes were meant simply as a reminder that he could be whipped.

The next two days were spent gathering peas, and the day after that digging potatoes. Both jobs, now, were harder than chopping cotton, but the days could have been worse. Jeb got two or three mild stripes each day, as if by policy, but he didn't mind that as much as the overseer's visits. Once or twice a day, Mr. Turnage would come around and stare morosely at them for a time, his gaze lingering on Dulcy's buttocks as she bent over the peas. Then he might ride Jeb for a while.

"Enjoying yourself, boy? Sure you don't want to make a run for it? Haven't had a runaway since you tried it more'n two months ago. Soon's the cotton's in, gotta light a fire to your tail and drive you off Sabrehill so we can have us some sport, chasing you down. Hayden, looks to me like Jeb here is slacking. Give him a stripe or two."

Jeb waited for the overseer to weary of him.

Distaste and irritation turned to alarm on the fourth day, while they were digging potatoes. He and Dulcy were working some ten yards from each other, when Mr. Turnage strolled over to Jeb and hunkered down beside him.

"Going all right, Jeb?" he asked. He actually sounded friendly.

"Yes, sir,"

Turnage pulled a leaf from a plant and bit it. He kept his eyes steadily on Dulcy, who was on her knees, digging. "Now that," he said slowly, "is what I call real poontang."

Jeb said nothing. He didn't look up. He worked steadily.

"You getting any of that stuff, Jeb?"

Jeb wondered uneasily if Turnage knew.

"I said, are you getting into that?"

"No, sir," Jeb lied.

Turnage laughed skeptically. "You're joshing me, boy. Unless I really did ruin you, and I heard I didn't. Now, that there is a real hot little piece, I'd say, and I know 'em when I see 'em. Bet she's juicier than both her sisters put together. Goddam leathery bitches. But Miss Dulcy—I guess it's the nigger blood that does it, ain't that right? . . . I said, ain't that right?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Well, I do. And I'll tell you something. I had me lots of women, black and white and all shades in between, some good and some bad, and none as good as they should be. No, none of them up to their promise. But that one there, that one's just got to be the best there ever was. The very best ever."

Jeb could hardly keep from raising his eyes to stare at the overseer. He felt as if he were beginning to understand Turnage for the first time. The man was an idealist, a dreamer, self-doomed to disappointment, frustration, bitterness. And the hell he suffered he tried to shift to others.

"You want to know one of the best things about being an overseer, Jeb? It's the females. Some plantations, they try to keep the overseer away from the females, but on most you got the run of them. And there's always plenty willing to spread for you for a little favor here or there—or so that you don't whip them or their men." He nodded toward Dulcy. "She your woman, Jeb?"

"No, sir."

"I think she is. And I'll tell you something." Turnage's voice shook slightly. "One of these days I'm gonna spread her, Jeb. One of these days I'm gonna have me a piece of your woman. And you can count yourself lucky for it, boy, 'cause if she's good as I think, I'll go easy on you."

Turnage stood and walked rapidly away. Jeb clutched handfuls of soil and squeezed them as if they were human flesh. The overseer, he knew, had not merely been baiting him. The man had meant what he said.

Jeb didn't immediately tell Dulcy of the conversation.

He was too repelled by it, and he didn't want to frighten her. He saw the day through, and the evening followed the same pattern of all the evenings since they had become lovers.

They walked back to the courtyard together, separating there to go clean up. For her own reasons, Amity had not deprived them of their own quarters or the use of the big-house kitchen, and they met at the kitchen to eat together and to talk to those closest to them: Lucy, Momma Lucinda, Irish, Leila. Eventually he and Dulcy declared their intentions of returning to their separate quarters to "do a few things and go to bed." One left the kitchen, and then the other. Jeb was fairly certain that neither Leila (who smiled) nor Momma Lucinda (who frowned) was fooled by this. About Lucy and Irish, he could not be sure.

He went back to his cottage, waited in darkness for ten or fifteen minutes, then departed. He always traveled a roundabout route to give the impression, in case he was seen, that he was going to one of the slave quarters. He could never be absolutely certain he was unseen, and on this night he had an irrational feeling that Mr. Turnage was watching. He put it down to the remarks that Turnage had made earlier in the day.

He never knew how Dulcy would greet him. On Sunday night she had been waiting behind her locked door. On Monday night he had been amused—and a little shocked—to find her waiting stark naked in the darkness of her porch. On this night, he found her waiting in bed, and they fell into each other's arms, soon to couple without a word. Only afterwards did he tell her about Turnage.

"I don't mean to alarm you, but try never to let yourself be alone with the man. Or even with him and one of his drivers. Miss Amity wants us to be together—we'll stay close together. And I swear I'll die before I'll give him a chance at you."

She tried to ease his concern, but he could tell that she was worried, too.

"Now, don't you get too upset, Jebediah," she said, reaching up to stroke his hair. "I've known all about Mr.

Turnage since the day he came to Sabrehill. Even at thirteen I knew what the look in his eyes meant, and he's never given me any trouble."

"No, but it wasn't known then that you were a chattel. And your uncle's not here now to protect you. And Mr. Turnage is quite capable of losing sight of his own best interests. He could do something to you that would wind up with him getting hung, but that wouldn't help you any."

"Oh, well, my uncle will be back before too long. Another month, maybe, or a month and a half. All I have to do is be careful till then."

"A month can be an awfully long time, Dulcy-child."

She smiled and moved her body against his. "Now, will you stop fretting? My goodness, Jebediah, you have become such a talker. When you first came here, you hardly said a word, and now all you do is talk, talk, talk. Instead, why don't you . . ."

She made a sweet suggestion, and he earnestly complied.

The situation with Turnage rapidly became worse during the next seven days. At least once a day he came to stare at Dulcy and to tell Jeb how he was going to "have some of your woman's ass" one day soon. Jeb got the impression that he was trying to work up his nerve for the attempt. The trouble was that, even if Dulcy was a chattel, and working in the fields, she was *still* the daughter and niece of Aaron and Joel Sabre. She was still *Miss Dulcy Sabre* of Sabrehill. And despite dirt, sunburn, and callouses, she still had the mien of a lady and not that of a field hand. If anything she was more than ever the lady with Turnage, even though she denied being one to Jeb.

Jeb thought there was a correlation between the overseer's increasing brutalities and his frustration over Dulcy. On Saturday night he gave Lucy, her facial wound still raw, the worst beating yet. When she came to Momma Lucinda on Sunday morning, she tripped on the kitchen stairs and had to crawl up them to get into the kitchen. Both eyes were swollen almost closed, her right canine tooth was missing, and her tongue, chopped by her teeth,

was so swollen that she could not talk. Dulcy took one look at her and started having hysterics; later she could not stop vomiting. Momma Lucinda had Jeb carry Lucy to her old bedroom in the mansion, swearing she would kill Miss Amity and Mr. Turnage if either tried to stop them. Neither did.

On the following Tuesday, Momma Lucinda sent Leila with a midday meal to Jeb and Dulcy. When they got back in the evening, they found that Leila had arrived back only a couple of hours before them. She had had the misfortune of encountering the overseer.

"I put her in your cottage," Momma Lucinda told Jeb angrily. "*You* don't seem to be using it."

Jeb and Dulcy went to see Leila. She looked unconscious, though she was not. As with Lucy, both eyes had been badly bruised: Mr. Turnage seemed particularly to enjoy closing eyes. Her lips were swollen, but she could still talk.

"Don't even help if you just lay still and let him do it," she said. "That man, he's got to hurt you. You got to scream and tell him you know he's there. Jebediah, ain't this never gonna stop?"

"It'll stop," Jeb assured her. "Mr. Joel will be back one day soon, and then it will stop."

They had to believe that. Even Jeb, who had felt Joel Sabre's knife and would willingly have killed him, had to believe that basically he was a kindly man who would put a stop to Turnage's cruelties.

But it seemed that he would not be back in time to help Dulcy. On Friday afternoon, Jeb and Dulcy were helping clean out the gin house and its yard. Jeb was in the yard when he realized that he had not seen Dulcy for some time. In something of a panic, he circled the house, calling her name, then entered it. There he found Dulcy with the overseer. Turnage had her backed up against a wall and was prodding her with the butt of his whip. With his left hand he had grabbed the right shoulder of her dress and yanked it down so that her right breast was fully exposed. She was saying nothing, but she looked terrified.

Turnage heard Jeb's footsteps. He turned and glared.

"Get out of here, nigger."

Jeb didn't move.

"I said, get out of here. I got me some business with your woman."

Even at a distance, Jeb caught the smell of whiskey. That helped to account for Turnage's nerve. Jeb still didn't move.

Turnage roared, "I said, get—"

He broke off, his eyes becoming uncertain.

"Mr. Turnage, sir," a soft voice at Jeb's side said, "got to talk to you."

It was Cheney, Jeb saw with surprise. And the chief driver was not looking at Turnage in any friendly manner. Legs spread, arms out, and head down, the scarred old fighter looked as if he might charge at any instant.

Turnage looked back and forth between Jeb and Cheney. He licked his lips. "Get out of here, Cheney," he said. "Take Jeb there and get your ass out of here."

"Got to talk to you, Mr. Turnage, sir," Cheney repeated. "Alone."

"Cheney—"

"Alone, sir. Got lotsa important things to talk about. Right now."

The threat was unmistakable, and so was the fear that came into Turnage's eyes. He might have stood up either to Cheney or to Jeb but not to both of them. He released Dulcy and turned away from her.

"All right, Cheney," he said. "Let's go outside."

Cheney nodded and led the way out of the gin house.

Dulcy slumped with relief against the wall. Then, adjusting her dress, she ran to Jeb and threw herself into his arms.

"It's all right," he said. "He's gone now, and he's not going to hurt you. I didn't know Cheney was your friend."

"My guardian angel in the quarters since I was a baby," she said, her voice muffled by his chest. "I love him."

"I never thought I could, but I might learn."

"But Jebediah—do you know what Mr. Turnage will do now?"

"Nothing," Jeb said, trying to reassure her. He didn't believe it, but he said it anyway: "He'll do nothing."

"Yes, he will. He'll beat Lucy again. Or hurt Leila. Just because he couldn't do what he wanted with me." She swayed in his arms, and her voice became faint. "Oh, Jebediah . . . I thought I could hold out . . . but I can't stand any more of this. I'm going to be sick . . . sick. . . ."

"I'll take you back to your house," Jeb said. "Just rest against me. I'll take you home."

He led Dulcy gently out of the gin house and along the east service lane. He would have to tell Lucy to keep her at home and safely away from both himself and Turnage, he decided. They could be together no more until Joel Sabre returned. Jeb had no intention of allowing Dulcy to be destroyed over him, and it was all too evident that that could happen.

As they passed the overseer's house, they saw that a carriage stood at the mansion door. Dulcy instantly straightened, as if all of her strength were returning.

"Why, that's—"

"It's Uncle Joel's carriage!" Lucy said excitedly from the porch. "He just arrived! Uncle Joel has come home at last!"

"Why, it's just that—just that—this is so unexpected," Amity said. "I didn't expect you for at least another month, and maybe longer. But Uncle Joel, honey, I just can't tell you how *thrilled* I am to see you!"

"Had to get back! Just had to get back!" Uncle Joel chirruped. "Irish, this is a damned good toddy. Ain't had a toddy like you make all the time I was in Charleston. Get yourself out of here and start making me another one."

"Yes, sir, Mr. Joel, sir," Irish said, pleased. "I'll make you another right quick."

Not only was Uncle Joel's return unexpected, but so was his personal appearance. The man who had left Sabre-hill had been sorrowful, weary, and ravaged. His foot had dragged, his head had hung. He had looked a good ten years older than his true age. But the man who had returned was full of new life. His eyes sparkled and his cheeks were pink with health. Every move he made was

charged with vigor, and he looked at least ten years younger than his true age.

"Now," he said, when Irish had left the library, "tell me everything. How're your sisters? How's Momma Lucinda? By God, I missed her cooking. How's the crop coming along?"

"Why, it's coming along just fine, Uncle Joel. Cotton's almost ready to pick. And we had the harvest flow down at the rice, of course—gonna be cutting rice soon."

"Good. Mr. Turnage been doing all right, then?"

"He's been doing just fine. Now, you know you can trust me to see to that. Didn't have to ask Mr. Paul or the major for help once."

"Didn't think you would. And our people—it's been a bad sickly season in places, I heard tell. How're our people?"

"Ain't lost a one so far. They're doing just fine. Why, if you were worrying about them, Uncle Joel, you could leave again tomorrow."

"No, no, no. Want to see to everything around here myself. Good to be back. Honey child, there just ain't no other place in the whole world like Sabrehill."

Why did the old fool have to babble so, Amity wondered, and why did he have to return now? For the first time in her life she had been exercising real power over others, *absolute* power, and having experienced it, she would never willingly pass it back to her uncle. She wanted him to stay away long and often and grow old quickly, so that it would be established that she and she alone ruled Sabrehill.

". . . and now tell me about your sisters," Uncle Joel said, throwing himself into a chair. "How's Lucy? How's she getting along with Mr. Turnage?"

"We-e-ell, Uncle Joel . . ." This could be ticklish. Amity perched herself on the arm of the chair and stroked her uncle's hair. "Truth to tell, they ain't been getting along very well. You know, under that calm face she puts on, Lucy has got a very wicked temper."

Uncle Joel nodded. "Busts out about every six months to a year."

"And I guess Lucy and Mr. Turnage had a little dif-

ference of opinion over something, and she took a knife to him."

"God almighty!"

"And with him struggling to get the knife away from her before somebody got hurt, she went and scratched her face a little bit."

"Bad?"

"Not too bad, but there'll be a mark."

Uncle Joel shook his head sadly. "Sometimes I wonder. . . . Well, I guess there was no doubt about that nigger. How's Dulcy?"

"Well, I'm afraid that's another kinda sad story."

"Let's get it over with."

"I think I wrote you most of it, Uncle Joel. You remember how she moved out of the big house here and into a guest house before you went to Charleston?"

"Never could understand that, but I was too full of grief to bother about it at the time."

"I know, I know. But after you left, it got pretty obvious why she wanted to be out there. She wanted more freedom to be with her own kind."

Uncle Joel looked up worriedly. "You said something in a letter about her and Jebediah?"

"She took care of him. Nursed him real good. But once he was on the mend, she just wouldn't let him alone. I told her, 'Dulcy, it ain't proper. You was brought up white—now, you act white!' But do you think she paid any attention?"

"You wrote something about punishing her?"

"Punished her just like Papa used to punish us girls. Told her, 'Every day you spend time with that boy, you're gonna earn your keep the next day at hard work.' And I made it stick."

"And that cured her, I guess. How long did it take?"

"Cure her, my goodness, no. She's still going out and working like a nigger every day, and not only that, Jebediah goes out and works with her. Two niggers side by side, chopping cotton and picking peas."

Uncle Joel looked away from Amity. "You know what that sounds like to me."

"I know. And I know that Jebediah ain't been spending every night in his cottage, neither."

Uncle Joel shook his head. "My God, what do they see in that boy? First Lucy and now Dulcy. And don't tell me some nonsense about the size of his implement—excuse me, honey—but I just purely don't understand it."

Amity was treading carefully, very carefully. "It just proves that blood shows, and like takes to like."

"I guess it does with Dulcy, all right."

"You know what I expect to happen to her?"

"What's that?"

Carefully, now. "Well, she's happy doing what she's doing and living the way she's living. She's happy with her man. And I wouldn't be surprised at all if she spent more and more time with her own people until finally she just sorta disappeared into the quarters. It'll get so we don't even see her for a month of Sundays."

Uncle Joel hunched forward in the chair. Amity waited for his agreement, the slow and knowing nod.

He shook his head vigorously. "No, she won't."

Amity clenched her teeth.

"No," Joel Sabre said, "I got to thinking, what would Aaron want? And when he said things like, 'I got all my girls provided for,' he didn't say 'all except Dulcy.' No, honey, Dulcy is going to get her full share of the monies and such, and dowry, and any income she needs until she's secure. She'll go free on her birthday if not before, and she can go north and take that damn stud of hers with her. That's what Aaron wanted, and that's what she's gonna get."

God damn! She had to get him back to Charleston and get him there, fast.

"But, Uncle Joel, the way she's been behaving—"

"Like you said, blood shows, and like takes to like, and Dulcy's just behaving according to her own nature. If she's black, it ain't her fault. If she likes to screw—excuse me, honey—more power to her." He paused and shook his head. "I don't know. Maybe I shoulda figured that way about Lucy too."

No, things were not going at all as she wished. She

had to do something and do it fast. Somehow she had to—

“Well, now, look!”

Uncle Joel broke off his greeting as Dulcy and Lucy appeared at the library door. He stood up from his chair, advanced a few steps, and stared at them. Dulcy, barefooted and grubby, was in slave’s rags. Lucy’s face was battered almost beyond recognition. Both looked frightened and ready to run.

“I guess you ain’t very happy to see me,” Uncle Joel said quietly.

“Oh, Uncle Joel,” Lucy said, her voice shaking. “You don’t know how happy we are to see you.”

Joel took a few more steps toward Lucy. Gently, almost tenderly, he reached up and touched her face. “Lucy, honey, I heard about the cut, but . . . you look like you been beaten ’most every day since I left.”

“That is . . . more or less . . . the case.”

Amity cursed silently: that goddam stupid Turnage. Not even Uncle Joel could deny what was before his very eyes.

He whirled on her. “You never wrote to me about *this!*”

“Now, Uncle Joel—”

“You wrote me,” he said to Lucy, “but I couldn’t believe. . . .” He slammed his hands down on a library table. “I *knew* I was doing the wrong thing! I *knew* it!”

“Now, Uncle Joel—” Amity tried again, but Joel ignored her.

“Lucy, honey, I don’t give a damn what you did with Jebediah or anybody else. There ain’t no excuse for what Mr. Turnage been doing to you, and it’s gonna stop. And I’ll make it up to you somehow. Get you a divorce, kill the son-of-a-bitch, somehow get you free of him. Just believe me when I say I never meant anything like this to happen. And say you forgive me.”

Lucy nodded, her lips moving soundlessly.

“That damn Turnage is gonna pay. And you, little lady,” Joel said to Dulcy, “I don’t know what I told you when I was all upset, but you’re gonna get everything

you got coming from your papa and go free on your birthday, and don't you worry about it. Your Uncle Joel will take care of everything."

"Why, I never doubted you would, Uncle Joel."

Joel looked at her strangely and turned back to Amity. "I don't understand it," he said. "Couldn't you stop Mr. Turnage from what he done?"

"Oh, Uncle Joel, I *never* interfere in family matters."

"Well, neither do I. But your own sister? And your own overseer? We got standards for white people here, and if you don't like how your overseer behaves, you got to whip him into line. Threaten to break his contract. You got to learn how to handle people, Amity." Joel Sabre shook his head. "Just goes to show a woman can't really run a plantation."

Amity's cheeks stung. *Get rid of him*, she thought. *Get him the hell back to Charleston!*

"Well, enough of all that," Joel said expansively. "Now I got you all together, I got something to tell you. Got big news for you."

"And what's that, Uncle Joel?" Amity asked.

"Ain't gonna be here long. Be here a few weeks at most, and then going back to Charleston."

Thank God! Amity's strained smile became real.

"But while I'm here, we all got a lot of work to do, fixing the place up. And when I leave, you all are going with me. Can you guess why?"

"Why, no," Dulcy said. "Why?"

Uncle Joel was all elephantine playfulness. "Aw, come on, guess! Try a guess!"

"Tell us!" Lucy laughed. "Tell us!"

"Can't guess? Why, to attend a wedding, that's why! Your old Uncle Joel is getting married! And now where the hell is Irish with that toddy!"

Amity's head rang. It was as if someone had struck a huge gong, and for the moment all she could hear was its brazen rattle. Distantly, as if reflected on water, she saw her sisters kissing her uncle's cheeks, her uncle kissing theirs.

"What about you, Amity," she heard Joel Sabre say.

"Cat got your tongue? What do you think about all this?"

She was losing it all, all of the power.

"Why, I hardly know what to say."

"You don't look very happy."

"Oh, I *am*! I am so happy for *you*, Uncle Joel. Happy enough to *cry*!"

"Well, now, don't do that."

"But who's the lucky lady?" Lucy asked. "Do we know her?"

"I think you do, slightly. Known her slightly for years myself, but she was married before. She's a young widow lady named Stampp, Mrs. Corliss Stampp. She's in her early thirties, and she already has two sons and a daughter. We plan to have more, of course. Yes, ma'am, one of the Sabre brothers just might provide a male heir for Sabrehill after all." Joel Sabre winked slyly at Amity. "In fact, I would say it was highly likely."

All gone, all.

Fourteen

Dulcy found Jeb in the kitchen, where Momma Lucinda was banging pots and pans in preparation for supper, and Irish and Leila were arguing loudly with two of the maids.

"There's going to be a wedding!" she shouted over the clamor.

"A wedding!" Momma Lucinda whirled on her. The noise stopped. Everyone stared at her. "What in the world are you talking about?"

"There's going to be a wedding! Sabrehill's going to have a new mistress! Uncle Joel is getting married!"

Momma looked at her as if Dulcy were going out of her mind. Her jaw waggled a few seconds before any more words came out. "After all these years? That man is getting married?"

"In a month. To a widow lady in Charleston. Irish, you'd better get that toddy in to Uncle Joel right now—he's working up a mighty thirst."

"I'm taking it—he's almost drinking it already!"

Dulcy threw herself into Jeb's arms. Today, what did it matter who saw?

"Jebediah, do you understand what's happening? Amity's not in charge anymore, and she never will be again. And Uncle Joel's so happy about getting married, he's trying to put everything right for all of us. And we'll go to Charleston with him in about a month, and then head right on up north. We'll be free!"

Free.

She really believed that.

Jeb remembered a father dying in torture from the flux. He remembered a mother raped, driven to suicide, and left to rot in a field. He remembered the whippings, the running, the knife poised over his genitals. He remembered the long years of nightmares within nightmares, and the handshake, the Judas kiss, and the broken promise that had started it all. He had known too much hope betrayed ever to believe in any promise of freedom again.

For Dulcy perhaps, but not for himself.

"Yes, Dulcy-child," he said gently, "you're going to be free."

Amity hurried along the east service lane through the failing late-afternoon light. It was absolutely imperative that she find Mr. Turnage before her uncle did. God only knew what Uncle Joel might do in his present mood—tear up the overseer's contract, drive him off of the plantation—and Amity *had to stop anything more from changing*. Turnage was useful, an ally, and she had to keep things as they were until she knew what to do.

She was lucky. Turnage might have been any place at all on the plantation, but she sighted him in the barn loft. "Mr. Turnage," she shouted angrily, "you get yourself down here this very minute!"

As Turnage came down the ladder, she glared up at his startled face. "Oh, you are so smart, aren't you?" she said in a low furious voice. "You are so goddam smart!"

"Miss Amity—"

"Are we alone here?"

"Yes. What—"

"It wasn't enough for you to marry my sister Lucy. It wasn't enough for you to get a good contract and a lot of money and a lot more coming. No, sir, you had to have the fun of cutting her face and beating her up. You had to make her look like a goddam mess!"

"What for are you talking to me like this? You never had no objections before."

"You are a fool, Mr. Turnage, a fool! You did that to my sister, and now my Uncle Joel is back home again, and he's ready to kill you. Yes, Mr. Turnage, to kill you!"

The overseer backed off from Amity as if she herself were holding a gun. Behind him, the cottonmouth slithered in its big basket.

"I never done a single thing I didn't have a right to do," he said fearfully.

"Christ, you are a fool, a real shithead fool."

Never before had she spoken so strongly to Turnage—she usually saved such language for slaves or, occasionally, her sisters. But never before had she been so angry with him. She put her hands to her face and breathed deeply, forcing herself to be calm. This was no time to alienate the overseer, and she could already see a counteranger growing in his eyes.

"He ain't gonna kill me," Mr. Turnage said.

"No, Mr. Turnage, he ain't."

"By God, I'll kill him first!"

She reached for his sleeve again and patted his forearm. "No, you don't have to do that. All we got to do is let Uncle Joel calm down a little bit, and then I'll take care of him."

"He's got no call to get hard with me. I'm the best damn overseer he ever had, and I married Miss Lucy for him."

"I know, Mr. Turnage, I know. Why, he ought to be grateful to you the way I am—all the things you done for Sabrehill. Never mind what I say in the heat of anger, Mr. Turnage. I am more grateful to you than I can ever say. Mr. Turnage, you must *know* how fond I've become of you."

"Just don't let Mr. Joel get near me and talk about killing!"

"Why, I'm not. And that's just the point. You and him, you've got to stay apart until everybody's all calmed down and can talk sensible again. And that means staying away from him at least the next two or three days and maybe longer. Do you think you can do that, Mr. Turnage?"

"I—I don't know."

"Well, you got to try. I'll do my best to keep him occupied, but if he sends for you or comes looking for you, don't let yourself be found. Stay out in the field quarters till real late. Or, after work tomorrow, go into Riverboro for the next day, like you was visiting a friend who was passing through. Anything, but stay away from Uncle Joel."

The overseer nodded. "All right. I'll do my best."

"Meanwhile, I'll try to think what else to do. And maybe we ought to meet again tomorrow sometime, so that I can tell you if anything has happened. Can we do that, Mr. Turnage?"

"Without Mr. Joel knowing? You know best about that."

"Where will you be working in the afternoon?"

"Anywhere you like. Maybe over to the west? Won't need many hands over there, but I ought to look at the cotton."

"Perfect. If you go straight west from here, you come to a far grove with a stream running through it. Keep looking for me there around three o'clock or after."

"I'll be there, Miss Amity."

"Fine." Amity stepped closer to Mr. Turnage. She put a hand on his shirtfront and looked deeply into his eyes. "I'll look forward to seeing you, Mr. Turnage, and having a nice long talk. Just you and me. Alone."

She turned away from him, left the barn, and started back along the service lane. Turnage followed more slowly, his eyes on the slightly swinging buttocks that seemed to know he was watching. *Goddam woman*, he thought. One minute she was snarling at you like an old dried-up bitch hound, ready to snap your balls off. The next minute she was touching you and looking at you and talking so soft, your mouth went dry and you could hardly keep your

pecker down. He decided he would take her suggestion and spend more time in the field quarters tonight.

When he reached his house, he looked carefully around the corner to be sure that Joel Sabre was nowhere in sight. He would have Mrs. Turnage get him a plate of food, and then slip off to the quarters. Reasonably sure that he wasn't seen, he moved quickly into the house.

Lucy was in the middle of the front room, doing nothing, just standing there with a faint smile on her face. She looked at him, and the smile never wavered. He wanted to slap it off of her, but he didn't dare. All he could do was say, "What the hell have *you* got to smile about?"

Lucy went on smiling.

She persuaded her uncle not to make a point of seeking out Mr. Turnage either that evening or the next day. "Right now you're tired from your trip, and you're real mad."

"You're damned right I am!"

"But if you was to take a shot at him, you'd probably knock the wind vane off of the cupola. You rest up until after Sunday—you don't want to do anything on the Lord's day anyway—and then you can go after him with a clear mind and full strength."

"Well, if you think so, Amity."

"I truly do, Uncle Joel."

All right, she had Uncle Joel and Mr. Turnage apart—she hoped. Now she had to see Paul Devereau just as soon as possible.

The next morning she had a roadcart hitched up and drove herself to the Devereau plantation. She had the bad luck to find he was not home, which meant she had to drive all the way to his office in Riverboro. Once there, she found he was with a client, and she had to wait. Everything, it now seemed, was conspiring against her.

At last she was admitted to his office. The moment the door was locked, she fell into his arms. They kissed.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," she murmured.

He smiled. "Not nearly as well."

"I've come so much to depend on you in these weeks since Papa's death."

"We have interdependent interests. You, your father's estate; I, my own plantation."

"Yes, but who would have guessed that business interests would become so personal?"

He gave her another little kiss. "You would, my dear. And believe me, I have no objection whatsoever. Quite the contrary. The combination of business and pleasure, affection and finance, is one of the great secrets of civilized living. Until our unfortunate revolutions began, it sustained the royal houses of Europe for centuries."

Was he laughing at her? She could never quite be certain. She did know that he was never fooled by their little intimacies, no matter how much he might enjoy them: he was as self-controlled in that respect as she. She also knew he was not forever going to be satisfied with a few kisses, though she was not yet ready to give more.

They slipped away from each other, and Paul rounded his desk. "And now," he said. "Did you merely drop by on your way to your seamstress, or is there a problem?"

She gave it to him straight: "Uncle Joel is getting married."

"Oh, Jesus!" He dropped into his chair as if he had been shot. He recovered enough to make the gesture of offering her a chair, and settled back again. "When did you find out?"

"He came home yesterday afternoon. He told us then."

"A lady of somewhat advanced age, one would hope? A touch withered, a touch sere—"

"In her early thirties. A widow with two sons and a daughter."

"And every hope of further progeny. It's as bad as I feared. Who is the lady?"

"A Mrs. Corliss Stampp. I barely remember meeting her—"

"Mrs. Stampp. *Worse* than I feared."

"You know her?"

Paul nodded. "A Charleston client. I think it was

through my father that Mr. Joel first met her years ago."

"But why worse than you feared?" Amity felt a kind of coldness, a hardness, creeping through her.

"Because I know the kind of woman she is. Let me describe her. A pleasant-looking woman, but plain. Private income, small. Three children. Not much in the way of prospects, then, and what she gets, she'll hang on to. And she has the intelligence to do it, if intelligence is required. Meaning no reflection on your uncle, she's considerably brighter than he is. Which doesn't mean she isn't fond of him—I can't imagine her marrying him otherwise, and so she'll cling to him all the tighter. But she is going to look to her own best interests and those of her children. Of course, the children by the earlier marriage are hardly going to deplete your uncle's estate."

"But if she gives him his own son—"

"Exactly. And she will do so, you can be quite sure. Your uncle and your aunt-to-be will strive mightily toward that end, even if she has to pop babies yearly until they get a boy-child. He, for pride and joy; she, to ensure her own future and that of her other children. As things now stand, my dear, Sabrehill is about to gain a new mistress, and you are apt to be a widow-lady yourself long before she departs."

A widow-lady, and never the mistress of Sabrehill. What was she to do, then? Return to the pursuit of Quentin Kimbrough and Kimbrough Hall? Impossible. Marry Paul and live on the diminished, impoverished Devereau plantation? Never. Find another bigger, richer plantation with a young, single master who would throw himself at her feet? A fairy-tale dream.

She was twenty years old and still unmarried and not getting any younger. And there was only Sabrehill.

"What shall I do?" she asked.

"Prevent the marriage."

"How?"

Paul leaned forward over his desk. Under his heavy brows, his gaze pierced hers. He said slowly and distinctly, "Any . . . way . . . you . . . can."

"He always did what I wanted, but I won't be able to talk him out of this."

"Then don't try."

"Then what?"

Paul shrugged. "I don't know. Blackmail him, if you have a way to do it. Break his legs. Pray to God that he gets sick."

"Now you're joking."

His gaze darted into hers again. "I . . . am . . . not."

Why was it at that instant Mr. Turnage's words—"By God, I'll kill him first!"—came to her mind? Had they ever really been out of it?

"It's true," she said slowly, "that it would make matters a lot simpler if Uncle Joel were . . . incapacitated."

Paul held out open hands, as if offering a world of possibilities. "The sickly season is upon us. The fevers, the flux. Providence would be lending a helping hand at this very hour."

"A fall is more likely than a fever."

"No more falls," Paul objected. "That's how your father died. The Sabres have had their share of falls, and God save them from having any more."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." Were they really having this strange conversation, Amity wondered. Were they really understanding each other correctly? As if to test, she said, "I suppose it's less a matter of Providence lending a helping hand than someone lending a helping hand to Providence. But I personally am very reluctant to do that."

"As am I."

"But if only I could find someone else who had a reason for aiding Providence. . . ."

"Your problem would be solved."

"Of course, if he should require a little extra incentive . . ." Amity paused. She widened her eyes slightly and emboldened her voice. "How far do you think I should go?"

Again Paul leaned forward over his desk. His eyes were hard, and his mouth pulled down, making him just a little ugly. "Amity, dear," he said, "we are not children. We cannot afford to be Charleston chivalry. Too much is at stake here. In your place I would do anything damn well had to do to get what I wanted. *Anything*,

Amity. And I would not think the less of you if you did the same. Rather, I would think the less of you if you did not."

Yes, they understood each other completely. Two of a kind, she and Paul Devereau.

"Obviously he hasn't made any changes in his will as yet," she said after a moment.

"Not yet. I doubt that he'll want to make any major changes. Just add some codicils to cover Mrs. Stamp and her three children. It will take me a considerable amount of time to see that they are properly drawn up."

"Yes, we do want everything to appear proper. I understand that I'm to be executor if something happens to Uncle Joel?"

"That is correct. Executor, along with me, for both wills, since Miss Lucy's . . . fall from grace."

"Poor Lucy."

Paul Devereau shrugged.

She stood within the grove, letting the anger, the fierceness grow as she waited for him. This was no time for sweetness and charm, she had decided. This was a time for desperation and determination, and that was what she had to give to Mr. Turnage—that and the hope of any reward that might go with it. The hot sun beat down on the trees, and Amity seethed.

She pretended not to see him as he approached. He dismounted from his horse, tied it to a tree, and walked toward her.

"Miss Amity . . ."

At the sound of her name, she turned to him and threw herself against him—the full length of her body against his, her face buried against his chest. She felt his astonishment—then a shaking that meant desire, and a hardening. His arms slowly came up around her.

She let him hold her only a few seconds. Then she pounded his chest once with a small fist and ripped herself out of his arms. She turned from him and covered her face with her hands.

"Miss—Miss Amity—"

"He's still angry." It was a whisper, nothing more.

"What? What did you—"

She whirled on him. "I said, he's still angry! Angry! He's like he was the night you all nearly killed Jebediah, only worse. I made him promise to rest today and not look for you, but he keeps prowling around. Come Monday, I don't know what's gonna happen!"

Mr. Turnage's eyes were wide. "He still talking about killing me?"

She nodded. "He said something about fighting a duel with you."

"He wouldn't duel with me! I'm just an overseer, I'm not no chivalry!"

"—said if he just shot you it would cost a lot of money to get out of it. If he dueled with you, would he kill you, Mr. Turnage?"

The overseer chewed his mustache, then nodded. "Reckon he would. That bastard can hit a squirrel's eye at a hundred yards without looking. I won't fight with him, and he can't make me."

"He don't have to. He can just whip you, he said. Whip you and stomp you like you did to Jebediah, he said, and after what you did to Lucy, no jury would ever convict him. Said he could whip you till you died of it, and it would be an 'accidental death.' Just like a nigger's dying from a whipping is always an 'accident.' Said he'd do it even if a nigger's death was too damn good for you."

Mr. Turnage paced back and forth under the trees. He wiped his face with his hand and glanced at Amity, who pretended not to be watching him.

"He ain't got his hands on me now," he said, "and he ain't gonna do nothing to me on the Sabbath. I can be better than a day's run ahead of him."

"A day's run? Like some damn nigger? Mr. Turnage, he'll have the patrols out after you—he'll have the whole damn militia. You are talking about Mr. Joel Sabre of Sabrehill, not some damn little upcountry yeoman! He'll chase you down in less than a week!"

Mr. Turnage locked his hands, twisted them, squeezed them. His mouth twisted.

"Then what am I gonna do?"

Her impulse was to tell him, "*You said you'd kill him*"

first," but she restrained herself. Instead, she said quietly, "I don't know. All I know is that it shoulda been Uncle Joel that got throwed off his horse. It shoulda been Uncle Joel who had the accident."

He looked sharply at her, as if a sudden thought had come to his mind. He considered it. Then, rejecting it, he shook his head and turned away from her.

"I got to get away. Somehow I got to get away."

Oh, no, you don't! It was an inward snarl. She went to him and grabbed his arms and, big as he was, whirled him around to face her.

"And what about me?"

"You? You got no troubles."

"No troubles? My God, why do you think I'm going out of my mind for you? Why do you think I'm here with you right now?"

She didn't wait for an answer. Again she thumped his chest with her fist and turned away from him. She felt the thick flow of sweat down her face and neck.

"And I hardly even looked at you before I suggested that you marry Lucy," she said. "Hardly even knew you. Didn't know what I was giving up. And now you're stuck with the bitch, at least till Uncle Joel kills you, and I ain't gonna have nothing, nothing at all!" She honestly felt the jealousy well up as she turned on him. "Well, how do you like her, Mr. Turnage? You were eager enough to marry her, weren't you? Never even gave *me* a goddam look, did you, and now you're stuck with her, and I—I—" The tears that came to her eyes were genuine.

"Miss Amity," Turnage said, bewildered, "are you trying to tell me—"

"I ain't trying to tell you noth—*don't you touch me!*"

She flayed with an arm to knock his hand away. She went to a nearby oak tree and leaned against it sobbing. She was giving him time to absorb all that she had said and to realize its implications. She heard the crack of twigs and scuffing of dirt as he paced behind her.

"I ain't gonna take no whipping," she heard him mutter desperately. "No man gonna do that to me. But how

am I gonna get away from him? What am I gonna do? Gotta do something."

She let her sobs die away. She turned slowly from the tree and leaned back against it. Mr. Turnage continued to pace.

"Do you realize, Mr. Turnage," she said after a time, "that there for a while we had it all? You and I. We had everything except each other."

He stopped walking and stared at her.

"For a month, Mr. Turnage, we ruled Sabrehill. We could do anything we pleased. Anything. I couldn'ta done it without you. It was like you were the master and I was the mistress. And now we've got nothing."

She raised her eyes to his, but he did not answer. She could still feel the tears on her cheeks.

"Do you want to know something, Mr. Turnage?" she went on. "I have a dream. I guess it's a wicked dream, but I don't care. It's mine. Do you want to hear it?"

Mr. Turnage nodded.

"I dream that things are back the way they were before Uncle Joel came home. You and me ruling. Only Uncle Joel ain't gonna come home no more—he ain't gonna change things. And sometime in the future, maybe a long time from now, but sometime . . . something happens to Lucy. Then there's just you and me. And Sabrehill."

The grove was as silent as the sun. Somewhere in the distance an animal bleated. A single leaf drifted slowly from the top of a tree to the ground. Mr. Turnage's eyes never moved from hers.

Mr. Turnage stepped toward her. "Do you want me to do something about Mr. Joel?" he asked.

"'Pears to me like you kinda got to."

"Maybe, maybe not. I could light out and take my chances."

"And lose all you worked for these years at Sabrehill. Lose what we had together. Lose what we could have."

"What you say we could have." There was a wariness in Mr. Turnage's eyes, she saw. He suspected he had been used and might be used again.

"What I know we could have," she said.

"Prove it."

She didn't move too quickly. She smiled. She knew that even with the sweat and the tears on her face she looked desirable. She went to him, went into his arms, and pressed her mouth to his.

She could feel the thump of his heart as his chest ground against her breasts. His hands found her buttocks, then one slid up to a breast. The hands began to invade her clothes, to open them.

"No," she whispered, "not here." She drew away from him. He wanted everything, but she could not give it to him like this, so suddenly. She was disgusted and repelled. She had to hide her feelings, had to have time to prepare them.

"Where?" he asked.

"Tomorrow. In the big house. While Uncle Joel and Lucy are at church."

"She don't go no more."

"Well, see that she does!" Amity said fiercely. "Make her go! I'll see that nobody else is in the house. I'll say I'm sick and want quiet and I'll lock the niggers out. Bring your key and use the piazza door. You won't have any trouble finding me."

Mr. Turnage smiled faintly and said, "Reckon not."

She returned the smile and touched his cheek. "You make yourself nice and sweet and clean in the morning, 'cause I've been looking forward to this for a long time. It's gonna be something neither of us will ever forget . . . Turn." She remembered some of his friends calling him that.

"Not me nor you," he said.

"And don't let my uncle catch you before then."

"Don't you worry, honey," Mr. Turnage said gallantly. "Now I got something to live for!"

She laughed. "And now you better go. We don't want to be seen together."

"Till morning, honey." Mr. Turnage started toward his horse.

"Oh, Turn?"

He looked back at her.

"Ain't you gonna kiss me?"

To bed down with Mr. Turnage. Sexual congress, they called it. Pleasuring. But it wasn't pleasure at all, because the thought repelled her.

How could she keep him from knowing? If he guessed, he would feel betrayed, used once again, vindictive. God only knew what he would do to her. Look what he had done to Lucy, and surely it wasn't because he found such pleasure with her in bed.

No, he must never know how she felt about him, and therefore she must not think of him as Turnage, even while calling him by name. She must think of him simply as a man, anonymous. As sex organ and hands that touched a body that was hardly hers. As something her own body, anonymous, could take pleasure from. As when Leila was in bed with her.

But was that enough? To lie still, legs spread, while he threw himself upon her? To let him take what he wanted and leave? No. If only it could be. But Leila sneered at such pleasuring, and Leila knew. Knew how to please and how to be pleased. How to please, and how to please by letting a man know she was pleased. Leila knew everything, and Amity tried to remember in detail every single thing that Leila had ever told her.

Somehow she would succeed in pleasing Mr. Turnage—if it killed her.

She was going to need a drink, she knew, and maybe more than one, so she took a decanter of brandy and some glasses on a tray up to her room. She poured herself a drink, swallowed most of it in a single gulp, choked, and nearly threw it up. It boiled in her stomach. She forced herself to finish the rest of it.

She took out the prettiest of her shorter, flimsier sleeping gowns—a summer gown. She stripped, avoiding her reflection in any mirror, and put the gown on. She would not lie naked waiting for Mr. Turnage. No, let him discover a little at a time the delights he was getting. She had another small drink.

The maid had already done the bed, and Amity

started to turn it down. But no. The thought of having Mr. Turnage in this room, the thought of remembering his having been here, was intolerable. She picked up the tray with the brandy and the glasses and carried it to the downstairs bedchamber.

She put the tray on a table near the bed, then closed the blinds so that the room had only a soft, dusky light. She took another drink, a larger one this time, and again she worried about holding it down. She turned down the bed and slid under the sheet.

She was frightened. She wished she had suggested some other place to Mr. Turnage—her uncle and her sister might turn around and come back to the house at any time. She wanted to run away, to disappear, anything to avoid going through with this. But it was too late now—she heard footsteps, hesitant and tentative, in the passage.

Then he was with her in the room, and she was sitting up in the bed, greeting him. The brandy burned through her unaccustomed body, and her mind went hazy. She was glad. Now she would not have to know too sharply what was happening. At her command, Mr. Turnage poured himself a drink and began to undress.

She closed her eyes for a moment to think of Leila and herself, late at night, before she had thrown the black girl out of the house. She thought of Leila and let pleasure begin, let her body swell. This was not Turnage in the bed chamber with her—ugly, stupid Turnage, whom she could barely stand to touch. This was merely a man, an ideal man, anonymous. A substitute for Leila or for some vague dream, he would touch her as Leila had; and, after all (she had to believe this now), pleasure had no gender. It was simply something that happened between any two bodies or alone.

Pleasure built. She opened her eyes. Fortunately, Turnage was not really ugly at all. He was even handsome in a raw, wild-eyed way, with a hard, strong, well-proportioned body. That body was already aroused, she saw now, already erect for her, and as Turnage threw the sheet down and moved toward her on the bed, panic

gripped her. She put a hand on his shoulder to hold him back.

"Turn, honey . . . wait. If we're gonna do this . . . we got to do it exactly the way I say. Exactly, y'understand now? 'Cause I'm gonna be real good to you . . . maybe even more'n you imagine . . . and I want you to be good to me. All right?"

He nodded, though his eyes were puzzled and perhaps disappointed.

"Now, we're gonna do things real slow . . . and gentle . . . and nice." Because that was the way Leila had taught her to do them. "And you're gonna do pretty much the same things to me that I do to you . . . and do them pretty much the same way. Understand?"

He did not. He wanted to clutch at her, to mount her, to take her at once. But her will prevailed. Soon he rolled away, to lie with his back to her, while her hands gently massaged his shoulders and traveled up and down his spine.

No, she thought hazily, this was not Turnage whose flesh she was kneading. This was nobody. This might just as well be Leila. And what was happening here did not concern Amity. The real Amity was far away, safe in some remote corner.

She leaned over him and gently touched his chest, lightly moved her hand over him, fondled him as she might have fondled Leila, or Leila her. Yes, this was no different from taking pleasure with Leila, and she gave herself up to it. Baring a breast, she touched him with it and let him touch in return . . . let him roll back toward her and begin his own gentle explorations . . . let him seek beneath her hem and let him find. . . .

He learned, this stranger in her bed. She taught him, this anonymous animal. No longer the rapist, he explored without haste and savored without greed. He heightened her pleasure until at last she abandoned her gown and lay completely naked with him, trading sweet tortures.

"Is it good, Turn?" she whispered.

"Is it good . . . oh, God . . . I never knew . . ." He buried his face in her as he never before had with a woman.

Yes, it was good. It drove him mindless, but it was not happening to her. Not to Amity Sabre; Amity Sabre would never allow such a thing, would never dare such a thing. No, this mindlessness, this animal fever, this lust was too dangerous. It was for the Leilas and the Jebediahs but not for Amity. Never.

She could hold him off no longer, nor did she want to. Desire became a frenzy. They rolled together until he was on his knees over her. This was the moment of truth, and, spread wide, she lifted herself to be impaled.

But she could not. She was Amity Sabre, who was cold to men; cold, calculating, ever-controlled, thinking, scheming Amity Sabre, and he was merely Turnage the ugly, Turnage the stupid, Turnage the animal, and she couldn't couldn't, couldn't—

But she could, because she had to, and there was a way.

She was Leila.

Yes, this was what Leila did, what Leila loved to do, and this stranger over her, this stranger trying to take her, was not Turnage, he was Jebediah.

She let it happen. Jebediah was taking her, easily, quickly (there was little pain, thanks, perhaps, to Leila's earlier ministrations). Jebediah was taking Leila. Leila was doing what Amity had been so afraid of. Leila was doing what Amity—she suddenly realized—had wanted to do with Jebediah from the moment she had first laid eyes on him. Leila was doing—

But she wasn't Leila any longer. She wasn't Leila, wasn't Amity, wasn't anybody. The whole world exploded, and she was lost.

She kept him in the bed chamber much longer than she should have, far longer than was safe, and when he was dressed again, she, still naked, clung to him. She thought of their bargain, but at that moment, whether or not Turnage kept his part hardly seemed to matter.

When he had gone, she poured a large glass of brandy and gulped half of it down. Never before in her life had she drunk so much. She staggered to a large mirror and stared at herself—sweaty, bleary-eyed, stained. She looked

at the blond arrowhead, felt beneath it, and felt a new surge of hot hunger. In spite of the long hours with Turnage, if another man had walked into the room at that moment—Paul, Quentin, Irish, any man at all—she would have begged him to take her.

"My God," she said aloud. "What's happened to me?"

Afterward Jeb would realize that he had seen the whole thing taking shape. *No, not afterward, not now, he would think, but even at the time. I saw it happening, inevitable as doom, even if I didn't put a name to it, and there was not a damned thing I could do about it.*

When he arose from Dulcy's bed and went to the quarters early Saturday morning, Mr. Turnage was not there. In his brief time as a field hand at Sabrehill, Jeb had never before known that to happen.

He saw nothing of the overseer all day. He went to work in the gin house, and when Dulcy appeared during the afternoon and asked him to go swimming with her—she was no longer required to do hard labor—Cheney urged him to do so. "Go on, she a boss-lady, you know that. And I ain't gon' tell nobody."

And there in the grove they saw Mr. Turnage for the first time that day—Mr. Turnage and Amity.

Silently, hardly believing, they watched through brush and vines and leaves. They could hear nothing of what was said—only murmurs floated on the warm air. Amity leaned back against the trunk of an oak tree, and Mr. Turnage stood watching her. After a moment, Amity stepped forward into Mr. Turnage's arms, and they kissed. His hands moved over her body until she stepped away from him. They said a few more words, murmurs through the leaves, and Mr. Turnage started to leave. He came back to kiss Amity again, and they parted, Amity heading for the big house and Mr. Turnage for the fields.

"I don't believe it, I just don't believe it," Dulcy said. "Amity and Mr. Turnage? Never."

"But you saw it."

"I still don't believe it. I can't. Should we tell Lucy?"

He thought about it and, not really knowing why, said, "Not yet."

The next incident occurred on the following morning.

He was in the kitchen when Dulcy came to tell him that she, Lucy, and their Uncle Joel were going to church in Riverboro together. Lucy, it seemed, did not really wish to go, but Mr. Turnage had demanded it, and she was going in order to keep peace. Dulcy herself was amused at the prospect of being the "nigger field hand" in the family pew. Amity was staying home because she felt ill.

The others had no sooner left than Amity announced that, because she wanted peace and quiet, she was locking the house and that everybody was to stay away from it. She was alone in an empty house, then, and Turnage was somewhere nearby. It was a situation that bore watching, and Jeb retired to his cottage to watch from behind his window.

After fifteen or twenty minutes, the overseer came out of his house. He looked around carefully, then walked south toward the river, disappearing behind the east end of the big house. Jeb left and walked casually through the gardens at the west end of the big house, but he saw the overseer nowhere.

He walked in a wide circle around the mansion twice. He noticed nothing unusual. He saw nothing at any of the upstairs windows. Then, as he started around a third time, he noticed that the blinds at the downstairs bed chamber window were completely drawn. That was unusual.

He crossed the piazza silently and stood at the window, but he could hear nothing. Therefore he went to the gazebo in the west gardens, where he could view the piazza, and waited. Another couple of hours or more passed before Mr. Turnage looked carefully out of the door, locked it behind him, and went back around the east wing of the house.

So he and Amity were definitely having an affair.

Jeb did not tell Dulcy—not at that time. He wanted to do nothing that might diminish her happiness at the prospect of freedom. They spent their Sunday afternoon in pleasure and dreams.

Everything was shaping up before Jeb's eyes, and perhaps he should have known to what end, but he did not. When, the next morning, Mr. Turnage again failed to ap-

pear at the field quarters, he gave the matter no particular importance. Later the overseer did appear, looking sickly and distracted, and Jeb thought he might be coming down with a fever—or maybe he was just worn out by Miss Amity.

It was, to Jeb, an odd sort of day. Nobody did much work. The drivers didn't care, because they sensed that the overseer didn't care either. It was as if the entire plantation were quietly waiting, waiting for something to happen.

But when Jeb mentioned this to Cheney, the driver only laughed. "Course they waiting," he said. "Waiting 'cause the picking season on us. Everybody take a deep breath and sun and laze some, and then the cotton ready, and we all go out and work like hell."

Perhaps that really was it, but Jeb felt there was something else. Something was taking shape.

The evening was like most others; in that respect, Mr. Joel's return had changed nothing. Jeb and Dulcy ate together on the kitchen steps, then went to their respective quarters. Later he walked through the dark to her house and went to bed with her. She laughed at their discretion. "I'll bet everybody knows by now. Amity would make a point of knowing, and if she knows, so does Uncle Joel. But Uncle Joel hardly cares, because I'm just his 'little black niece following her own nature,' as he says, and besides he's got his own fish to fry. He's made that pretty clear to me. He's just looking forward to marrying his Mrs. Corliss and bringing her to Sabrehill and being rid of us."

After they had made love, she talked about their sea trip to the North and what they would do when they arrived there. He listened to her dreams and wished he dared to share them. But he did not. Sitting by her, he looked down on her, her dark hair spread on her pillow, and he smiled and nodded, afraid to say anything. "Do you know I'm getting you cheap," she said mischievously, "because Uncle Joel says you aren't worth much? Poor worthless Jebediah." She reached for him under the sheet that half-covered her. "Oh, if only he knew what you're worth to me!" And still holding him, she fell asleep.

He sat there for a time, watching her. Even in her sleep she smiled slightly, and her breasts rested high and flattened and lovely, the nipples casting shadows. The night was cool, even for a dying summer, and he pulled the sheet farther up over her. He kissed her and put out the lamp.

The long soft wailing sound awakened him. It came from a great distance, came past the courtyard and the gardens and through the walls, and perhaps he never really heard it but only sensed it. It was like an echo of all the despair in the world, and in an instant he was wide awake and out of the bed. He heard Dulcy say, "Oh, God, what was it! What was it!" And he knew that it had been real.

He pulled on his pants, nothing more, and left the house. Dulcy, behind him, was still pulling on a dress as she came out the door. They hurried through the darkness, passed the gardens and the kitchen, into the courtyard.

A few torches lit the yard, and a light came from the office, where a mule-drawn wagon was pulled up. A number of the people from the quarters, both men and women, were in the courtyard whispering excitedly to each other, and Jeb and Dulcy hurried through them. Lucy and Mr. Turnage stood by the wagon, Lucy covering her face with her hands. Amity stood nearby at the office door.

"What is it?" Dulcy asked. "What's happened?"

"Is Uncle Joel." Amity slurred her words and swayed, and Jeb realized she was drunk. "Is Uncle Joel. Went out early this morning, never came back. Never came for supper, so I had Mr. Turnage send out a search party. They found him washed up on river bank. He drown."

Jeb could not see if Amity was smiling or not.

"He's dead." she said.

Jeb turned to Dulcy, and in the light of the torches, he saw the horrible knowledge written on her face. The knowledge that he himself had gained long before. The knowledge that every dream was dead—that always and forever she was to be a slave.

Fifteen

And now it was truly all hers, and her sense of power had never been more certain. It was virtually absolute. In time, she supposed, she would marry Paul Devereau and add the Devereau plantation to Sabrehill, but she was in no hurry. He was as strong willed as she, and no matter how much he pleased her, he had yet to learn that it was she who would always rule: Amity Sabre.

She stood in the doorway of the office, watching the early morning activity in the kitchen and the lights in the gardener's cottage, the spinning house, and other out-buildings. Her domain, her realm. She spent more time than ever in the office now, all of her mornings and most of her long evenings, but she liked to stroll about, arms crossed on her chest, surveying the little kingdom that was hers.

She watched Dulcy emerge from the shadows to the west of the big house, followed by her nigger candyman. Once she would have been content to ignore Dulcy, to forget her existence, but the little bitch mongrel had got

in her way too often. She had spoiled too many things, and for that she had not yet finished paying. Dulcy didn't really know her place yet, but she would be broken and taught it, as Jebediah and Lucy had been broken and taught theirs.

Mr. Turnage came to the office door. He saluted her with a riding crop. She had been waiting for him, and here he was with that rather stupid adoring look on his face. In the two weeks since Uncle Joel's "accidental" death, she had been putting him off in the name of discretion, but she was afraid she would have to "entertain" him again soon. The idea repelled her, though not in the way it once had, but still, it didn't really matter. She would do what she had to do. In time she would be rid of him.

"Ah, Mr. Turnage, honey," she said, returning his smile, "I have some things I'd adore having you see to. Now, first of all, about our little Dulcy. . . ."

Yes, he thought as he hurried through the half-light to the field quarters, he would see to Miss Dulcy all right. He was the master of Sabrehill now, master in fact if not in name, and there was not a thing he could not do. Mr. Aaron and Mr. Joel were dead, and he had spread the mistress of Sabrehill, and if that didn't make him the new master, what did? Master of Sabrehill *and* of Miss Amity Sabre.

But, by God, she had been wonderful. He had always thought that the pleasure was in the power—you beat them down, spread them, stabbed them, shot your load, and if they were real women, they loved it. With Amity Sabre, that had somehow been reversed—the power was in the pleasure—and he had caught a glimpse of a whole new world. Of all the women he had ever had, slave, whore, or white trash, she was the only one who, having had him, had wanted him again and made him want her. All the others, he now felt, had hidden a great truth from him, had deceived and cheated him. His great dream now was of the pleasure that was yet to come with Amity.

But they had to be careful, he knew that. There must be no suspicion that there was anything between them, any-

thing that might suggest murder. That damned lawyer, that Mr. Devereau, kept coming around on business for the Sabrehill estate, and he must never get the faintest idea that Joel Sabre's death was anything other than accidental. He was a troublemaker, Miss Amity had explained. "*We* know Uncle Joel's death was an accident," she had said, straight-faced, "and we mustn't let anyone else in the world think otherwise."

And the "accident" had been so easily arranged. Turnage had lain awake most of that Sunday night, sweating with fear as he tried to think how it could be done. Could he cause Mr. Joel to take an accidental fall, as Mr. Aaron had done? Mr. Joel liked to hunt—could a gunshot wound be arranged? Or that old cottonmouth in the barn—could Turnage somehow set that on Uncle Joel? He had found no sure solution to the problem.

And then in the morning before sunrise he had seen Mr. Joel heading for the river with his tackle.

Joel Sabre had loved to fish. When he was disturbed, when he had argued with Mr. Aaron, he would fish at any time, day or night, whether or not the fish were biting. He would go down to Sabre's Landing and embark in a small skiff.

Joel Sabre was a very poor swimmer.

Turnage followed him in the dark, down the slope to the greater darkness of the trees and the river. There was little likelihood that anyone was watching, or could see even if he were. By the time Turnage reached the Landing, Mr. Joel was out at the end of the pier, preparing his tackle. He looked around when Turnage's boots hit the wooden planks, but he didn't return Turnage's smile. He went back to preparing the tackle, facing the water.

Turnage didn't think. His chest seemed about to explode and his bowels to let loose, but he never broke stride. He walked straight into Joel Sabre, clamped a hand over his mouth to prevent a cry, and walked him face-first into the water.

The water was not deep at that point; it came slightly above Turnage's waist. He was astraddle of Joel Sabre, holding him facedown. He remembered a tale of Miss Amity trying to do this same thing to Miss Dulcy some

years before, and for an instant he didn't know if he was going to laugh or scream.

He did neither. The struggle lasted no more than two minutes, and Turnage held him under for several minutes more.

When it was finished, Turnage was breathing audibly and sweating, even under the water. He tied Joel Sabre's body to the skiff's transom with a handy piece of rope, gathered up the tackle, and silently rowed downriver. Some of the tackle went into the water, the rest stayed in the boat. At a bend in the river, Turnage released the body where it would drift into the shore. He shoved the skiff out where it would continue downriver a way, then climbed up onto the bank.

When the sun came up, he dried quickly.

Since that morning, neither he nor Miss Amity had ever spoken of what had actually happened. An accident had happened—an accident that had made her mistress of Sabrehill and left him free to run the hands as he wished to run them.

And that was exactly what he was doing, he thought as he entered the field-quarters square, for he and Miss Amity were very much of a mind. From the day of Joel Sabre's burial, the softness that so easily gave birth to insubordination and rebellion was gone. Turnage's system was the common one, and it was quite simple. Make the hands fight for survival, make them scramble to live. Never trust them, make them always stand in fear. Remember always that they were African savages, not altogether human. Choose the strongest and most vicious males for your drivers, and let them do pretty much as they pleased—as long as they produced results. In return for results they received the better food, special liquor allotments, more opportunities with the women. If they failed to produce results, they answered to the overseer, were demoted, got the whip the same as any other slave.

Miss Amity gave instructions as to how a hand should be treated only when she had a special interest.

As with Miss Dulcy.

He looked for her in the crowd as he crossed the square, and he spotted her at Jeb's side, clinging to his arm, look-

ing small and frightened. Looking like a whipped nigger wench.

Miss Amity had not said in so many words, but she seemed to want to grind out of Miss Dulcy any thought that she had ever been a "white" girl in a big house. It was not enough that she knew she was black and a slave. She had to be taught what that meant. She had to be made to *think* like the kind of animal she was. She had to learn that her blackness and her slavery were in her bones and not just on a piece of paper.

And she was learning. She and her buck lived together openly now—Miss Amity insisted on it. They ate at the kitchen maintained for the two barracks—Miss Amity commanded it. They had been worked together for a few days, each seeing the other humiliated and whipped, but then some instinct had told Turnage to separate them, and Miss Amity had agreed. And so, in her loneliness, far from Jeb, Miss Dulcy had learned that a driver didn't give a damn if he urinated in front of her or even on her—he did it purposely. And if she had to squat, a driver was always there to see that she didn't waste time—if she did, she got the whip across her bare buttocks. And she learned what it meant when a woman, whipped repeatedly and for no reason, followed a driver out of the field—she was paying what she had to pay to be left in peace. Yes, Miss Dulcy was learning.

And it was time to start the day with a small lesson.

The hands were falling into their usual gangs or waiting for individual task-assignments. Turnage looked around. Hayden, Luther, and a couple of other drivers were near at hand. Cheney was nowhere in sight at the moment, which was just as well, since he had an inexplicable fondness for Miss Dulcy.

Turnage decided to use Luther for this small lesson, because the wiry young driver had a particularly strong streak of nastiness. He called him over and gave him his instructions, then proceeded with the assignments.

A moment later he saw the driver edging up behind Miss Dulcy. Neither she nor Jeb was aware of his presence. With all the care of a thief, Luther slipped his hand between Dulcy's arm and her body. Her dress was torn at

the side, and he deftly slipped his hand into the aperture to fondle her breast. Turnage choked back laughter.

Dulcy stiffened—then cried out and twisted around, swinging a harmless backhand at Luther. And Jeb, hardly knowing what had happened, but enraged on Dulcy's behalf, did exactly as Turnage had hoped. He grabbed Luther and threw him onto his back in the dust.

Turnage's amusement turned in an instant to genuine rage. "All right, I saw that!" he roared. "Get that boy!" The drivers charged in. "Get him to the post, you hear me? Get him to the post right now. Ten stripes and they damn well better be good ones! Won't have nobody hitting my drivers like that."

Jeb was immediately seized and dragged toward the nearest whipping post, which happened to be in the middle of the square. Dulcy tried to follow, protesting, but Turnage grabbed her arm and held her back.

"Now you see what you done?" he asked. "I saw it all, and that boy wasn't doing you no harm, Miss Dulcy. If you'd just stood there and let him do it, nobody woulda got hurt. But because of you, Jeb is getting hisself a whipping."

With satisfaction, he saw the pain and dismay in her eyes.

The first small lesson, he thought as he walked toward the whipping post, and the day had hardly begun.

When he returned to the house that evening, Jeb found Dulcy sitting on the bed, propped up on pillows, in that slightly sideways position that protected the back. In the light of the low-burning lamp she looked much younger than her years and yet far older. Ageless. She wore a fresh nightgown, and as always she had scrubbed herself clean of the mud and the sweat. Her knees were drawn up against her breasts, her arms wrapped around them. Her dark eyes were hollow and her face drawn, and he could see the delicate bone structure below her eyes. By God, he thought, she *was* black. Maybe only a sixteenth or even less, but he was sure he could see it now.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, he took one of her so-clean long fine-boned feet, stroked it, and held it.

"I waited for you at the quarters kitchen," he said gently. "Did you come in early?"

She shook her head. "I wasn't hungry."

"After a hard day's work? You should eat, Dulcy."

She closed her eyes and shook her head again.

"Was it bad today?"

She didn't answer, didn't move, and he thought angrily, helplessly, that of course it was bad. It was always bad.

"What was it?" he asked. "What happened?"

Though she didn't open her eyes, she turned them away from him as if ashamed. "Nothing so awful, when you think about it, I guess."

"Tell me."

It was as if she had to force her eyes open, had to force the calm that was in them.

"Mr. Turnage," she said. "He made me work naked."

Naked under the beating sun. Naked to anyone who happened to look your way. Naked to the driver's eyes and the driver's whip. Groveling in the dirt as you dug your potatoes, so that you would be seen as little as possible. Your own body, of which you might have been proud, used to humiliate you. How could you ever be proud again?

"How long?" he asked.

"Most of the day."

"And of course he whipped you."

She nodded.

"I suppose he said you were slacking."

"Yes."

"Did he do anything else?"

Her eyes quickly left his. "It was so silly."

"What was it?"

"He made me stand up in front of him. Me, without anything on, naked like a—like a—"

"Like a nigger slave up for auction."

She nodded.

"And then what did he do?"

"Oh, he just stood there smiling and talking in that polite way of his. 'By God, Miss Dulcy, you sure are a beautiful cunt. 'Bout as beautiful a cunt as I—'"

"He said that?"

“—ever seen. Just can’t hardly keep my hands off of that pussy, it’s so beautiful. Why, if you was to let me play with you some, just touch you a little, don’t know as I’d have the heart to whip you nearly so much. Why, if you was to let me . . .” She laughed mirthlessly. “He sounded just like a naughty little boy in the quarters, all stirred up and trying to find out what it’s all about. So goddam childish.”

Jeb’s face was so stiff he could hardly speak. “Did he force you?”

“Force me?” Dulcy laughed again, as if the thought were ludicrous. “Of course not. That’s not the idea, is it? The idea is to make me give up, isn’t it? The idea is to make me say, ‘All right, go ahead. Do it. *Please* do it. But please, please don’t hurt me anymore.’ That’s the idea, isn’t it?”

She moved to him on the bed, putting her arms around him and hiding her face behind his shoulder. For a moment he heard only her breathing.

“And Jebediah,” she said then, “I’m afraid I will. Maybe not tomorrow or the next day, but someday it could happen. I’ll think, ‘Oh, hell, what’s the difference? It’s only skin and bone and muscle, the same as a hand or a foot. Just lie still and let him do it and don’t even think about it. It’ll all be over soon, and then maybe he won’t hurt you anymore.’ ”

He tore out of her arms. He didn’t want to be embraced, he wanted to tear down, to destroy. He had not known he was any longer capable of this rage. He had to get out of the house before he started pounding down the walls.

“I’ll get you some food from Momma Lucinda,” he said, seizing on the excuse to leave.

But she knew him now. “Jebediah, don’t you do anything foolish!” she cried as he rushed out into the night.

He hurried, all but ran, toward the big-house kitchen. It was forbidden to them now, but he could not have cared less. He would have welcomed Turnage’s or Miss Amity’s trying to stop him as he went toward it.

Momma Lucinda looked at him in surprise as he

stomped up the west steps and into the main room, saying, "Give me some food for Dulcy." She knew Miss Amity's orders, but she didn't hesitate. She ladled some stew into a bowl, heaped biscuits on it, and poured a large mug of milk. As she put the food into Jeb's shaking hands, Miss Lucy entered through the east door. Jeb glared at her—he couldn't help it—and left the kitchen.

"Jebediah!"

Jeb halted as Miss Lucy called after him. He waited until she had caught up with him.

"You're angry," she said. "Has something—"

"They're ruining her," he said. His voice was shaking like his hands. "They're ruining Dulcy."

"Yes, I know that."

"They're ruining her the same as they ruined you and me."

"We're not ruined yet."

"And with your permission, Mrs. Turnage, ma'am, I intend to murder your goddam husband."

Her slap was like a pistol shot, and for a few seconds he couldn't see.

"Now, you listen to me, boy, you keep your head!" Her voice was harsh; she lowered it. "Don't you go around talking about murder. Don't you even think about killing that man. If we've guessed right about Amity and Mr. Turnage, she'd like nothing better than to have you kill him. Then she'd be rid of him, and she could hang you, and where would that leave Dulcy?"

She was right, of course, but her words only left Jeb more frustrated and angry than ever. Then, abruptly, the anger faded into helplessness.

"Miss Lucy, can't you get her away from here? Couldn't the two of you run away?"

"*Scar-Faced Woman with Younger Companion and Little or No Money.* . . . No, Jebediah. Amity would have us back here in no time at all."

"But we have to do something."

"We shall. Somehow we shall. But, Jebediah, don't you do anything without speaking to me first, do you understand? Do nothing."

A clatter of hooves drew their attention, and a carriage entered the courtyard—Mr. Paul Devereau's carriage, Jeb saw.

"Do you have a plan?" he asked.

"Yes," Miss Lucy said, watching the carriage, "yes, I do have a plan of sorts. I've been thinking, biding my time, waiting for the right moment . . . and maybe tonight. . . ."

But it wasn't really a plan at all, she thought later, as she sat rocking on the overseer's porch. No, it was more a business proposition, and an evil one at that: an attempt to strike a bargain with the devil. And she really had no idea of how Mr. Turnage would respond to it.

Looking about the courtyard, she tried to work up the nerve to speak. Paul Devereau's carriage was still in front of the office, and she guessed that it would remain there for some time. There were still lights in the office and the kitchen and a few windows of the big house, but Sabrehill was quiet. Mr. Turnage, as usual, sat with his straight-back chair tilted back against the wall, and he had his jug at his side and a cup in his hand. Lucy gripped the arms of her rocking chair and forced herself to speak.

"Mr. Turnage," she said slowly, "there is a matter I have been meaning to discuss with you, a matter of concern to us both."

Turnage sipped his whiskey. "And what would that be, Mrs. Turnage?"

"It has to do with our place at Sabrehill. I assume you wish to remain here."

"I intend to."

"I would like to do the same. And therefore I think you should understand certain things."

Turnage stirred restlessly. "Say what's on your mind, woman."

"Bear with me, Mr. Turnage. We have more in common than you think. . . . You know, of course, that while my Uncle Joel was in Charleston, my sister Amity ruled Sabrehill as if she were its mistress."

"Her and me together."

"That's right. And you must be aware that Amity nearly

lost Sabrehill. If my uncle had lived to marry, his wife would have been mistress of Sabrehill, and his sons would have inherited the plantation. And you, you may be interested to know, would have lost your contract."

"Contract!" Turnage's laugh was a short bark. "My life, you mean. He was mad enough to kill me."

"Kill you?" The statement interested Lucy. "No, he was planning to help me get a divorce, hardly the act of a man who meant to kill you. Where did you get that idea?"

Turnage was silent for a moment. "Never mind. Maybe you just don't know."

"In any case, if my uncle had lived, Amity would have had nothing, and you would have been discharged. Therefore you had to do something about him. Isn't that true?"

The front legs of Turnage's chair thumped down. "What—what the hell are you talking about?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Turnage. I'm not trying to make trouble for you with the law. I doubt that I could, in any case."

"You're damn right you couldn't!"

"In fact, I'm trying to save you trouble."

"Spit it out, woman! What have you got to say!"

Lucy was amazed at how calm she had become. "I am saying that two weeks ago today you murdered my Uncle Joel."

"Woman, you are out of your mind!" There was panic in Turnage's voice. The cup dropped from his hand, clattering on the porch.

"No, Mr. Turnage, I am not. But I do believe that you fail to see where your own best interests lie. I would like to help you."

"I don't need any help from you!"

"I believe you do. Don't you know that time is running out for you?"

Turnage rose from his chair. "I think you better shut up."

"Give me just another minute or two. Believe me, you'll profit from it, Mr. Turnage. You'll profit."

Turnage was silent, and she went on. "Have you stopped to consider, Mr. Turnage, that now that my uncle

is dead, Amity has no further use for you? Except, perhaps, to kill me. But aside from that, you are an uncomfortable reminder of what has happened. You might at any time name her as your accomplice. And therefore, just as she used you to eliminate Uncle Joel, she must use someone else to eliminate you. I would guess that she will use Mr. Paul Devereau."

"You don't know nothing about it," Turnage said softly, stepping closer to her.

She ignored him. "But that need not happen. Do you realize, Mr. Turnage, that if anything were to happen to Miss Amity right now, *you and I* would become master and mistress of Sabrehill? *You and I*, Mr. Turnage!" *And with Paul's help, I would be rid of you so fast . . .*

But he didn't seem to hear her. He came a step closer, his eyes wide and glazed.

"You and I," she repeated. "You would be master of Sabrehill and live in the mansion, and what did Amity promise you that compares with that? Oh, I know she whored for you, she let you rut in her the morning before the killing, but surely you didn't kill for love. For a few dollars, Mr. Turnage? I am offering you Sabrehill—"

He took took one more step, and the force of his broad hand across her face bent her over the arm of the rocker. "God damn you," he said between clenched teeth. "God damn you and all you Sabres with your snotty noses in the air. God damn you all but her, and don't you ever again say a word against her, 'cause you ain't worth cleaning the shit from her ass. You call her whore, but I was the very first for her, which is more than you can say, and it was like the very first time for me, too, and . . . and . . ."

Oh, my God, Lucy thought, he DID do it for love! He won't listen to a word I say because he DID do it for love!

"I'm sorry, Mr. Turnage," she said, fighting back tears. "I'm sorry. I never dreamed you felt so deeply."

"Yes, you goddam Sabres. You think you're the only ones got feelings. You with your goddam books and music and high-flown talk. Goddam overseer works like a nigger for you, and he's nothing but shit! Shit!"

"I'm truly sorry." Lucy felt blood trickling from her nostril to her mouth. She looked desperately for a way to salvage the situation. "I'm sorry, and—and to think what Amity's doing to you."

"She ain't doing nothing to me."

"You're . . . you're reconciled to her love affair with Mr. Devereau?"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Oh, come now, Mr. Turnage. You don't think his trips over here almost daily are for matters of business, do you?"

"There's a lot of business with a big place like this, especially after two deaths—"

"Oh, for God's sake, you fool!" Lucy almost screamed. "Will you grow up? What did she promise you? Never to marry, but to be your mistress? How could you believe such a thing?"

"She never—"

"Or did she say she'd marry you after you got me out of the way?" Turnage's eyes widened, and Lucy guessed that she had struck on the truth. "Do you honestly believe that she would ever marry you? Or even willingly go to bed with you? *You*, Mr. Turnage? A Sabre lady with *you*?" She loaded her voice with every last drop of venom in her soul. "Mr. Turnage, the Sabres are of aristocratic stock. And what are you? Why, you are common dirt, Mr. Turnage—shit, I believe was your word. Now, you have known Amity Sabre for four years. Can you honestly say that she would ever marry common dirt like you? Would Amity Sabre ever do anything but use you? For God's sake, Mr. Turnage, the truth is before your eyes! They left the office long ago—she's probably in rut for him right—"

She broke off as he raised his hand again. She had been begging for a beating, and he let her know she was going to get one. But then, surprisingly, he slowly lowered his hand and backed away, looking at her as if she were something unbelievably evil.

His heart pounding, he rushed from the porch. He wanted to hear no more. He wanted to hide in the dark-

ness and forget every word the woman had said, every poisonous, burning, dismaying word.

But the words could not be forgotten, any more than they could be unsaid. Why *did* Devereau come to Sabrehill evening after evening? Why *did* he and Amity disappear into the office, or sometimes the house, not to be seen again for hours? What *was* Devereau up to with Turnage's woman?

Mr. Turnage meant to know.

It often seemed to her now that the hours with Paul Devereau were all that she lived for. Nothing could equal those hours, certainly not the fine wines and brandies she had taken to sipping during the day, not the satisfaction of having bested Lucy, not even the sweet savage taste of vengeance on Dulcy. She had thought to use sex, love, pleasure to secure Sabrehill for herself, but the means had captured her; the means had become her obsession.

They had become lovers the day after Uncle Joel's funeral. The experiment with Turnage had to be repeated but with a different man, someone she could desire as she never could the overseer. And so she had driven to the Devereau plantation, made love to Paul in his own house, and again the effect had been devastating. They had met almost every day since, either at the Devereau plantation or at Sabrehill, and only after the first mindless hour or so did they lay their plans and look to the future.

As now. Paul was saying something about Mr. Turnage. Amity lay on her back, while Paul sat between her legs, one leg across his lap. She wiggled her toes up his bare chest, and he seized the foot and kissed it. She laughed and pulled the foot away, then lifted her body to stretch, catlike, until he kissed her more intimately. She sighed and fell back, and he leaned over her, resting on an elbow.

"But can you control him?" Paul asked, and she forced herself to concentrate.

"Oh, absolutely. You may not believe this, but he adores me."

He kissed her nipple. "Oh, I can believe it."

"And he's absolutely the right overseer for Dulcy. He does just as I tell him. I've seen him at work—only at a distance, of course—and he couldn't be better."

He stroked her lightly. "Aren't you being a little hard on Dulcy?"

"Hard on her? Why, it's a kindness, honey child. She's learning to be what she is, that's all. It's something we've all got to go through."

"All right, keep him on for a while. In a way, it's best. Mr. Joel's death will become distant in his mind. He'll stop thinking of it as a threat to himself, something he'd like to blame on you. He may even start thinking that it really was an accident."

"He could do that. He's such a fool."

"Then, when the right time comes, I'll see that he gets into bad trouble of some kind. He'll be accused of stealing something from me, perhaps, or some kind of malicious mischief—maybe a barn-burning."

"Like to burn him down with it."

"That could happen. Anyway, if he does live, he'll have to run for it, and he won't dare come back. We'll see to that. Believe me, there'll be no difficulty in getting rid of Mr. Turnage."

"I'd sure like to get rid of Lucy too. I won't feel safe until she's off and gone."

"Amity, honey, don't worry! Between us, we control everything now! With me at your side, you cannot be touched. Trust me!"

"I do, Paul, I do."

As the hot urge returned to her, a molten tide flooding through her body, she kissed him, moved against him, sought to give and take pleasure.

"God, Amity," he said shakily after a moment, "I've never known anyone else like you. Never. Do you know you have an absolute genius for love?"

She laughed. *And for hatred, too*, she thought. *And for hatred, too.*

Sweating, nerves taut, Turnage went to each of the office windows. The curtains were drawn so that he could see absolutely nothing inside of the little building. The

windows were closed, which was unusual at this time of the year, and not a sound came through them.

He looked around. Devereau's horse stood quietly before its carriage, statuesque in its patience. The courtyard was empty, and Lucy was no longer on the porch. He hated the thought of her seeing what he was doing.

He went to the office door. On evenings when Amity was alone in the office, the door was usually ajar and the windows open. When Devereau was with her, the door was always closed, whether the windows were or not. Turnage racked his brain for a reason to knock at the door, but reason seemed to have fled from him. Somehow he had to find out what they were doing in there.

Then he remembered: there was a small window on the seldom-used portico entrance, and it was uncurtained. He hurried to it. Very carefully he moved to the edge of the window until he was looking into the lighted room.

It was empty.

Where were they, then?

He looked at the mansion. Light showed through a few downstairs windows; they must be there. After Paul Devereau had called at the office, they had locked it up and gone unseen by the portico into the big house.

Turnage thought of the downstairs bed chamber.

He tried the mansion's portico door. It was locked. Amity had developed the habit of locking up carefully. He walked along the courtyard side of the house, looking in windows, now hardly caring if Lucy saw. Dining room, pantry, and library were lighted, though Amity and Devereau were nowhere to be seen. Going around the end of the house to the piazza side, he was relieved to see that there was no light in the window of the downstairs bed chamber.

But that didn't mean they weren't in there.

He still had his keys. The piazza door was locked, and he opened it with great care, avoiding any sound. It took him several minutes to get into the high-ceilinged passage. It was dark, but he saw at once that the bed chamber was unoccupied.

A little light flowed into the hall from the dining room. A little more came from a room beyond the second-

floor balcony. Turnage stood in the passage, sick with the knowledge that Amity and Devereau must be up there together.

He knew he should leave the house at once. He knew that, at the very least, he was risking his position at Sabrehill. At worst, and not unlikely, Paul Devereau would simply pick up a pistol and shoot him dead. Overseer or not, Turnage was a trespasser, the invader of a home, and he could be killed with impunity.

But he had to know. He had to be absolutely certain. *"You, Mr. Turnage? A Sabre lady with you?"* Miss Lucy's words had torn at his illusions as if they had been mere cobwebs, the self-deceits of a born fool, someone to be used by a Sabre and discarded like trash. *"Mr. Turnage, the Sabres are of aristocratic stock. And what are you? Why you are common dirt, Mr. Turnage. . . ."*

He had to know.

And so, silently, slowly, he went to the other end of the passage and started up the stairs. He stayed on the outside of the steps and rested some of his weight on his fingertips. Up he went, silently, slowly, to the first landing, and then around the bend and up to the second. There, on the second floor balcony, he stayed on toes and fingertips as he moved toward the half-opened door that spilled dim light. They hadn't even bothered to close the door all the way. Why should they? They were safely locked up in the mansion at Sabrehill.

He heard her whimper of pleasure before he reached the doorway, but he had to look anyway.

The blinds were drawn; that was why he had seen no light from the outside. A lamp glowed on a table near the bed—just one, but it was sufficient. He saw quite clearly that her hands rested flat on the bed at her sides, as if to help her raise her buttocks, and that her ankles were locked over his back. They moved, and she whimpered again.

His impulse was to rise to his feet and scream his pain. To charge into the bedroom and tear them apart. To strike and pound and kill. If he had brought a gun, he might have murdered them both as they lay together on the bed.

Instead, he backed away, backed down the stairs as silently and slowly as he had come up. Paused only when he heard her sudden hoarse cry. Went to the other end of the passage and out the door. Silently turned the key in the lock.

He crouched by the door for a moment as if in pain.

"Would Amity Sabre ever do anything but use you? For God's sake, Mr. Turnage, the truth is before your eyes!"

And of course it had been all along. No woman, he knew in his heart, would ever give him such treasure without taking it away.

And he had loved her.

It was more than he could stand. The thought of going to his own house, of facing his wife and seeing the triumph, the scorn, in her eyes was unbearable. He crept around the east wing of the mansion, crept through the gardens, crept out to the barn. There he did what he had not done in years. He fell to the floor and let tears come.

In the big wicker basket, the cottonmouth rustled.

Sixteen

They could do nothing now but wait and hope. Poison had been administered, but it might not work. A gun had been cocked, but it might not fire.

Nothing happened on the first night. Lucy told Jeb and Dulcy that she had watched Mr. Turnage enter the big house and come back out some minutes later. She had thought—had hoped—that he might be going to his house for a weapon, but instead he had gone to the barn. She had continued to watch for a time but had seen no more of him. Evidently he had fallen asleep in the barn and spent the rest of the night there.

The next day was one of those easy ones, when the drivers exerted little pressure. Neither Jeb nor Dulcy saw Mr. Turnage except at a distance. At the end of the day, they washed and ate at the quarters kitchen, as usual, then returned to their house to finish cleaning up and to relax. After a time, Jeb went to the courtyard to watch. He dodged Mr. Turnage, who was in the kitchen talking to Momma Lucinda, and stayed close to the kitchen

wall where he could view the courtyard without easily being seen. Lights were on in the office, and the door was open. Amity, a glass in her hand, appeared in the doorway and leaned against the jamb. Not a very ladylike posture, Jeb thought. Not ladylike at all. She lifted her glass high and drained it. When she stepped back from the doorjamb, she seemed to stagger slightly, then she vanished again.

Jeb walked back to the house, where Dulcy waited for him on the porch.

"Anything?" she asked, as he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"She's drinking again."

Dulcy shook her head and laughed softly. "My goodness, she's certainly making up for lost time, isn't she. Out of the bed and into the bottle. You didn't see Mr. Paul?"

"No."

"Maybe he's not coming this evening. I think he's usually here by now when he does come, isn't he?"

"I think so."

They listened to the night sounds and waited. There was nothing to do but wait.

"Jebediah."

"Yes?"

"It's hopeless, isn't it?"

"No. It's never hopeless." He didn't believe that, but it had become easy to say it for Dulcy.

"I think that we're fooling ourselves. Nothing is going to happen. The night will pass and bring another day, and we'll go back to work, and it'll always be the same. Picking and ginning. Hauling and shucking. Pulling fodder. Day after day, the same thing. And there'll always be a Mr. Turnage and the drivers and that goddam sun that you can't get away from . . . except in the cold rain and the mud. Always the same until the day we die."

She was learning, and it broke Jeb's heart.

Amity poured herself another glass of Madeira. African wine, she thought, Portuguese African wine from distant islands, and it was delicious—heady, spicy, sen-

sually exciting. She had gone without so much in the past, but now at last she was beginning truly to live. Her own plantation. Her own slaves. Her wines, her bed, her man.

Yes, her own man, and how was she going to get through the next few weeks without him? She had thought of putting Mr. Turnage in charge of Sabrehill and going to Charleston with Paul—it was a common practice to leave an overseer in charge—but somehow it seemed unwise. Not so soon after Uncle Joel's death. Not with Dulcy here as unfinished business. She would simply have to forgo the pleasures of her man for a time and enjoy the consolations of Madeira.

She went to the door of the office and looked across the courtyard toward the kitchen. It was closing down, and Mr. Turnage, having finished some business there, was crossing the yard. *Damn Turnage!* she thought. The sooner they got rid of him, the better. Then she could marry Paul and forget all about the unfortunate business of Uncle Joel. She would willingly have burnt a warehouse of cotton with Turnage in it to have him off of her hands.

But then, in a swift reversal of feeling, she felt sorry for the man. *Poor Mr. Turnage!* She often felt sorry for people when the wine made her feel soft and warm and melted, and Mr. Turnage so obviously adored her and had been waiting so long for further reward. But how much longer would he be willing to wait? She had a feeling it would be unwise to put him off forever, and now that Paul was going to be in Charleston, it might be a good time to give Mr. Turnage a few hours. Not tonight, of course; she was not in the mood for it tonight. But fortunately wine or brandy did make the idea of pleasuring with Mr. Turnage much easier to contemplate.

Meanwhile, he must not think she had forgotten him or was purposely ignoring him. She waved to him to come to her and stepped out of the office to meet him.

"Ah, Mr. Turnage."

"Miss Amity."

He smiled at her. His smile was a little crooked, his eyes were soft. She smiled back.

"Haven't hardly talked to you the last little while," she said.

"No, ma'am."

"Hope everything's going all right for you, Turn, honey."

"Yes, ma'am. Just fine."

Amity suddenly remembered the glass of wine in her hand, and hoped she didn't look foolish. Or drunk. She would have to watch her speech. She was *not* drunk, of course, but she wouldn't want Mr. Turnage even to think she was.

She looked down at the ground between them—looked shyly, she hoped. "Whenever we do talk, Turn, seems like it's business. About Dulcy or something. I sure wouldn't want you to think I haven't thought about you lately."

"Why, I never thought that, Miss Amity."

"It's just that you and me, we got to be so careful."

"Oh, I know that. I know that."

Head still lowered, she raised her eyes to his. "Hope you been thinking about me."

"I have, Miss Amity, honey. I really have."

It seemed to her that his voice broke slightly, and that pleased her. She looked around as if to see that they could not be heard, then leaned closer to peer deeply into his eyes. "One day real soon now . . . maybe next week sometime . . . maybe you and me? . . ." She tried to make it sound as if she were asking him, as if the privilege and the pleasure were his to grant.

"Why, that would be real nice, Amity, sweetheart," he said, smiling, and she could have sworn there were tears in his eyes. There was, she decided, something almost sweet about his smile and his eyes, and she felt the need to grant him something more, some pleasure that he might like . . . and that might keep him away from her for a time.

"You know, Turn, I been thinking. You been taking care of Dulcy real good."

"Well, I thank you, ma'am. I been trying to do just what you wanted me to do."

"I know that. And you've succeeded. And as far as

I'm concerned, from now on you can do whatever you think is best with her."

"All right, I'll do that."

She leaned close again and, smiling, touched his chest lightly with her fingertips. "What I mean is, as far as I'm concerned, you can do anything you want with her. Just treat her the way you would Leila, say, or any other little darky gal that came to your attention. You know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean."

"Well, that's just fine. And, Turn . . ."

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I can hardly wait till—till one of these days soon when you and me, we . . ."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Well, good night, Turn, honey."

"Good night, Miss Amity."

She had failed. She knew that Turnage was going to do nothing about Amity when he came into their dark bedroom and began to undress. She wanted to shout at him, *You fool, it's your chance! She's alone now—go to her, talk to her, frighten her. MAKE SOMETHING HAPPEN! Don't leave things as they are! Didn't you hear me when I said they'd kill you? Didn't you believe me?*

But she said nothing. She lay perfectly still and tried to feign sleep as he finished pulling off his clothes. If only he thought her asleep, perhaps just this once he would leave her alone.

She should have known there was no way to escape him. She had failed, and now he was going to use her to try to forget Amity. Naked, he slid into the bed beside her, and she couldn't help but shrink from his touch.

"Lucy?" he whispered. "Miss Lucy, honey?" As if they were lovers. As if he could give her anything but pain.

As he gently stroked her breast through her gown—he had never done that before—she bit her lips to keep from crying out, and she braced herself against the onslaught to come. She should never have gone to bed before him, she knew that. Ordinarily she stayed up while he drank; she hoped he would fall asleep before her. But

tonight she had wanted to give him a chance to confront Amity. And since he had seemed to be through with her—he hadn't touched her since his morning with Amity—she had thought she might be safe.

"Mrs. Turnage? Lucy?" he whispered, as if seeking the right formula to get a response. She kept her eyes tightly closed, but he must have known she was awake. "It's all right. I ain't gonna hurt you."

The hand continued to stroke her breast. She smelled no whiskey on his breath, and a faint hope came to her that he was speaking the truth, that this time he would not hurt her. If only she didn't antagonize him.

"I ain't gonna hurt you," he repeated. "Not at all. Want you to know that. You don't mind if I do this, do you?"

She dared not continue silent. "Not if it pleases you," she said.

"It pleases me. It sure does please me." He leaned down over her and kissed her eyes. He had never done that before, either.

The hand moved into the top of her gown, and her whole body went rigid. He felt it.

"Now, don't do that," he said. "I'm trying to treat you nice and kindly, and you oughtn't to do that. You want to turn over on your belly and let old Turnage give you a rub for a while, get some of the knots out?"

"Yes."

His hand slipped out of her gown as she turned away from him, and he began to work on her shoulders and back. She didn't know why he was behaving this way, and she didn't really care. She would cooperate as long as he didn't hurt her. The hands moved over her back more deftly than she would have expected, and she began to relax. He felt that, too, and he laughed. "Guess old Turn knows a trick or two, don't he?"

She didn't answer. *I am not here, she told herself. I am in a different bed in a different time. The man who is touching me is a different man. I know of no Mr. Turnage—he is either forgotten or never to be met. I am with my lover. . . .*

In the weeks that she had been with Turnage, she had

never tried to escape into old dreams, memories, or hopes. It was as if he had destroyed those, along with her battered face and body and soul. They had been useless to her—she had lived in day-to-day pain, and a tattered dream healed nothing. But now she picked through those old dreams, memories, and hopes, like forgotten trash in an attic, trying to find something that would help her endure the night.

I am with my lover. His breath is my breath, his flesh is my flesh, his touch enlivens me. Nothing exists but our love for each other. Nothing exists but the pleasure we give each other. I am with him, and we are all that is. . . .

It helped, but not enough. She felt a tepid response, a warming, but she cringed as he again reached for her breast. Dear God, why wasn't he with Amity? Why wasn't he whipping her, fucking her, killing her, anything but this? What if Amity *didn't* rid Sabrehill of him? What if she succeeded in keeping him on as a vicious pet even after marrying Paul Devereau? But surely she wouldn't. Lucy couldn't stand this for the rest of her life—Turnage gentle was as bad as Turnage brutal, and she wanted to be sick.

Lover, distant lover . . . lover, be with me now . . . lover, take me, take me, take me. . . .

It helped some, she thought, with a sob that Turnage might have mistaken for passion. She could pretend that it was not he who lifted her gown, not he who divided her legs. When the moment came, she managed to warm enough to make the coupling painless. And she even gave him some pleasure. *My last gift to you, Mr. Turnage, and why, dear God, did it have to be me?*

"Now, was that good?" he asked, still with her.

"Oh, yes," she said weakly. "Very good."

"And it'll be better, I promise."

"Yes."

They parted and rolled away from each other, lying back to back. She was afraid of becoming pregnant, but she felt too exhausted to get up. Too exhausted and too defeated. She wanted only to wrap herself in darkness

and forgetfulness. Turnage's side of the bed shook slightly, and he made some kind of whimpering sound, but surely it was impossible for him to weep.

And suddenly she knew she was alone in the bed.

She sat up. She had no idea of how long she had been asleep.

"Mr. Turnage?" she called.

There was no answer.

She hurried out of the bed. She looked for Turnage's discarded clothes, but they were nowhere in sight. He had put them on again and left.

She looked out of the bedroom window. A light still burned in the office.

And then she knew. She was as certain as if she were already watching it. *My God*, she thought, *it's going to happen! It's going to happen after all!*

The kitchen was dark now, and the courtyard was utterly quiet. A light came distantly from the big-house quarters, and another lamp burned in the big house itself, but the brightest light was in the office. At this hour it was not at all unlikely that Miss Amity had fallen asleep there.

So much the worse for Miss Amity.

Turnage knew he might be observed, but he thought it unlikely. Fortunately, most niggers knew enough to hold their tongues about what they saw, but you could never be sure with house servants. In any case, he would have to take his chances.

He left his porch and crossed the service lane to the storehouse. He unlocked the door and entered the dark interior without lighting a lamp. Feeling his way about, he soon found what he wanted: a six-foot pole with a stout piece of rope of the same length fastened to one end. At the same end there was a staple through which the rope doubled back to form a loop or noose. By pulling on the free end of the rope, the loop was made smaller. He wished he had the nerve to handle the cottonmouth bare-handed the way he had seen some of the blacks do, but the idea of actually touching that mass of cold, writhing scales terrified him. He left the storehouse

door unlocked so that he could return the pole quickly later on.

He had been made a fool for the last time, he thought, as he went silently along the service lane toward the barn. They thought they could use him in any way they wished and then, as Miss Lucy had said, "eliminate" him. Well they were wrong; it was not he who would be eliminated. It was that blond bitch who for four years had looked at him like he was a piece of dung and then turned whore for him (and Miss Lucy was right; Amity Sabre was a whore, and the worst, most treacherous kind) and used him to do her killing for her. Had used him and immediately gone to another man.

But he hadn't taken care of Mr. Joel for her only. He had also done it for himself. She had told him that they would rule Sabrehill together, and now she was trying to cheat him, trying to take his share. All right, if that was the way she wanted to play, he would do the taking. *"Do you realize, Mr. Turnage,"* Miss Lucy had said, *"that if anything were to happen to Miss Amity right now, you and I would become master and mistress of Sabrehill?"*

Master and mistress of Sabrehill. That was what he had been promised, and that was what he was taking. He trusted Miss Lucy to know what she was talking about, and he would make his peace with her. She wasn't much, and he had marked her up some, but he would give her her goddam Sabrehill and share it with her. Maybe he could even teach her something about pleasuring, the way he had been taught. That was the one thing he owed Miss Amity for, and for that he had paid in full.

Now he would pay her for her betrayal.

He reached the barn. He wished he could work with the snake in the dark, but he didn't dare. He found a lamp in a corner and lighted it.

The very thought of what he was about to do made him sweat. What did they call the snake? Old Benjy or something like that. He was the largest cottonmouth Turnage had ever seen, a fat, lazy old six feet of snake who lived a life of ease. Cheney and some of the other hands fed him smaller snakes, fish, turtles, and the like. They

would pick him out of his basket with their bare hands and let him lie around on the floor of the barn with no fear of him whatever. Old Benjy, they would say, never hurt anybody in his life except for a couple of fool dogs that came yapping at him. He just wanted his food and his bowl of water and to be left alone. A pet. A pet cottonmouth that could kill you in seconds.

Turnage put the lamp in a holder where it would shine into the basket. The basket was about three feet high, by three deep, by four long, and it had a lid secured by a leather loop and a block of wood. Turnage unfastened the loop and opened the lid.

There Old Benjy lay, six feet of coiled scale and muscle, brown with wide black bands, a pale streak on his head. A broad spadelike head with light lips and a deep pit behind each nostril. The head raised, and Old Benjy stared at Turnage through dark vertical pupils. Turnage sucked air.

When he lowered the loop on the pole toward the snake, the creature seemed to know what was going to happen and to resent it. The head waved from side to side, the mouth opened slightly, and the tongue flickered out. As the head raised slightly, Turnage, almost in panic, tried to bat it back. The head then shot up, exposing fangs, and a thin hiss came from the throat. But then, more by luck than by design, the loop fell over the head, and Turnage yanked the rope tight.

The snake fought as he lifted it from the basket. He hadn't thought it would be so heavy, and he anchored the pole under his right arm, wrapping the rope around his hand. The snake whipped itself about, its tail lashing Turnage, and it seemed to be straining its head toward him, as if hoping to sink its fangs. Turnage stared into the incredibly big wide-open white mouth, its twin needles fully exposed.

He kicked over the basket, on the supposition that it might have fallen over if someone had failed to secure the lid properly and Old Benjy had gone on a night hunt for food. He put out the lamp and left the barn.

Now he had to reach the office as quickly as possible without being seen. He crossed the service road and went

past the coach house to the east gardens. From there he could see that a light still shined in the office window. The snake, heavier each minute, continued to whip about, and he wondered if he might kill it with the rope loop. He doubted it. Old Benjy was still hissing, which meant he was still getting air in his lungs, and Turnage would never have guessed that he could make so much noise.

He stepped onto the portico. Through the door window he saw Miss Amity sitting in her father's chair. Her head lolled back, and even at this distance her eyes looked glazed. A glass of wine stood near her hand on the desk.

He stepped off of the portico and toward the courtyard door of the office. It was ajar, and it seemed impossible that Miss Amity didn't hear the hissing of the snake. Turnage's entire body was trembling, and he was soaked with sweat. His quaking knees nearly gave out under him. For a moment he had an impulse to drop the pole and the snake, to run, to run as hard and fast and far as he could, to leave Sabrehill behind him forever.

But Sabrehill was going to be his. There would be one more "accidental" death, and he would be master of Sabrehill. He had only to walk through the office door.

He prodded the door farther open with the pole. Advancing the dangling pit viper before him, he stepped into the room. The hiss became louder, almost like a hoarse voice, and Amity turned in her chair to face him, her softened blue-gray eyes uncomprehending. But then the eyes widened.

—and oh my God she knew now, he had come here to kill her, she was going to die as Uncle Joel had died, no, worse, he had that great hissing murderous snake, and he was coming toward her with it, and she was going to lose everything, now when at last she had it all, why hadn't she known he would do this—

—but no it wasn't fair, not after she had beaten both Lucy and Dulcy, not when she had Sabrehill and her slaves and her man, she would not let him kill her, there was a gun, she knew there was a gun, it was in Uncle Joel's desk, she had seen it many times—

—but he was coming closer, and the snake writhed and hissed, hissed angrily, murderously—

—but the gun was in her hand now, a six-barreled pepperpot, as ugly and deadly as the cotton-mouthed moccasin, and Turnage was backing away now, his eyes filling with horror as she lowered the barrel on him, and he dropped the pole and snake and turned to run—

—and the gun went off—

They were standing there, the three of them, by the time the second shot sounded and Turnage came reeling out through the door. As far as Jeb could see, he wasn't even wounded. Too bad, he thought. If only Turnage and Miss Amity had killed each other off. If only it could have been ended so easily.

There were no further shots.

Turnage fell back against the wall of the office. He was panting as if he had been running half of the night. He slowly shook his head, and small, pained whimpers floated on his breath. He looked from one to another of them, and they saw understanding come to his eyes. They had been watching him all the time. They had been waiting. One last time he had been used, manipulated. He had been used for a marriage, and then for a murder, and now . . . now they didn't need him anymore.

He held out his hands toward Miss Lucy as if to appeal to her. As if to say, it was for us. Everything could have been different. And Sabrehill could have been ours.

"Jebediah," Lucy said in a hushed voice, "kill the son-of-a-bitch."

The hands that had reached toward Lucy raised high in the air and became fists. Turnage's "No!" was an anguished roar, and he rushed at Jeb. The fists came down with astonishing force, knocking Jeb's arms down and pounding against his chest. Jeb fell back. A fist slammed into his ribs like a battering ram, then another slammed into his other side. Blow followed blow, and Jeb would never have guessed that Turnage was so powerful. But the man was fighting to escape, fighting for his life.

And Jeb found himself yielding, retreating. He raised his guard, hit back, forced Turnage to fall away, and yet

the man returned, and Jeb found himself fighting blindly. He at last managed one solid blow that stopped Turnage, and he pulled back a fist, readying his entire weight behind it, when something odd happened to the overseer. His eyes glazed, and he fell to his knees.

Only then did Jeb see her: Leila, standing behind Turnage with a broken plowshare in her hands. He had no idea of where she had come from, but she was here now, and she was raising the plowshare for a second blow. Her eyes glittering with hatred, she brought the edge down with all her strength, sinking it into Turnage's skull with a dull axlike thud. Turnage fell forward, sprawled on the ground. He tried to rise up on his hands, and rolled over. His eyes were still wide, still alarmed, but from his open mouth there came only a hissing sound. Jeb grabbed the plowshare from Leila's hand, and with one hard blow, finished the job. Turnage's eyes went blank, and the hissing stopped.

And now Amity. Jeb hoped the snake had done its work. He hurried into the office.

But Turnage had failed. The snake lay in the center of the floor, its head raised. It had escaped from the loop which had held it, and it looked about, mouth gaping, as if it might be frightened or confused. Amity, back by her father's desk and unable to reach either door, strained away from the snake and pointed a pepperbox pistol at it, holding the gun in both hands. She pulled back the hammer and triggered it repeatedly, but either the gun was misfiring or not all of the barrels had been loaded.

She saw Jeb, and something like relief came into her eyes. She lowered the pistol.

The snake looked at Jeb, then shifted its gaze back to Amity. At that instant, Jeb grabbed it firmly behind the head with his right hand and lifted it from the floor. With his left hand he grabbed the squirming body. The snake twisted and whipped, trying to get away, and its great white mouth opened incredibly wide. Its hiss made Jeb think of the dying Turnage. He stepped toward Amity.

She screamed as she realized what he meant to do. She whipped the pistol up again, and Jeb dodged to

one side. There was only a metallic click, but if the gun were loaded and misfiring, it might go off at any time.

He took another step, the snake frantic in his hands, and the gun clicked again.

The third time, a bullet roared by his face. Jeb struck out at her gun-hand with the snake, and Amity screamed and dropped the pepperbox. There was less fear than fury on her face now, and her scream was more a savage snarl. She tried to get past Jeb, but he had her cornered; she tripped and fell to the floor, her skirt riding high on her legs.

Somewhere behind him, Jeb heard Dulcy crying out, "Oh no! Don't do it, don't do it, don't, don't, don't—" but she was cut off as if a hand had been clamped over her mouth, and by that time he was bending down over the kicking, flaying, snarling Amity.

He hesitated for only an instant. Then he thought of the scar on a woman's face and of a girl naked in the fields. He thought of the whip and the running and the dead who had been left behind. It had to end somewhere. It ended here.

He pinned a leg with his knee, then jammed the fangs into a white thigh and held them there. Once was enough. Amity lay still, wailing, and as the wail began to die away, she kicked just once, breaking off the fangs.

He stood up. Wielding the snake like a whip, he slammed it against the floor with all of his strength, stunning it, then tossed it out into the courtyard where he could kill it.

Dulcy hurled herself into his arms and buried her face against his chest. Holding her tightly, he watched while Lucy advanced through the room and stood over the dying Amity.

"You wanted it all, didn't you?" she said quietly. "No matter who you had to hurt, no matter who had to die. Well, you got it. But it's mine now, Amity. All mine."

Seventeen

Was it hypocritical of her to wear the black of mourning? she wondered. To wear it for Mr. Turnage, yes, it must be. But for Amity . . . no, she decided. They were sisters, and there had been a time when she loved Amity. Because of their mother's death, she had even helped rear the younger girl, and in the distant past there had been good times as well as bad. Now, that infant Amity was like another person.

Yes, it was possible to mourn Amity without hypocrisy. I am a murderer, she thought, the deliberate murderer of my own sister, and I mourn my victim.

"Lucy . . ."

She turned away from her father's desk. "I'm sorry, Paul. I'm afraid I drifted."

"That's understandable. You've had a great deal to think about lately. You've been under a terrible strain." His voice was deep, gentle, soothing.

She looked at him, this handsome silver-haired man who had once courted her. The man Amity had loved,

apparently, if it was possible she had ever loved anyone. The man who always knew where the power lay. "Yes," she said, "I have been under a strain."

"I am only here, Lucy, to tell you that I shall do everything in my power to help you. And that you need have no worries, no fears. Not as long as I'm at your side."

At my side? she thought wonderingly. *What does he mean, at my side?*

"It never occurred to me that I might need to worry," she said aloud.

He leaned forward in his chair, and she was afraid he might touch her. "Lucy, we are old friends. More than once I forgot pride and asked you to marry me after you had already refused me. It was a bitter experience to see you marry another. But I want you to know that I feel toward you just as I did before."

Anger glowed. "Paul, you were my sister's lover. We have just put her into the ground."

"I was speaking only of my regard for you, Lucy," he said quickly and smoothly, "only of my regard. Naturally, at this time I would never speak to you of love."

"I would have you speak to me of love—never."

He froze. His deep-set eyes, suddenly hard, held steadily on hers, probing and assessing. She let him see what he pleased, silently daring him to deny that he had been Amity's lover.

When he spoke again, his voice was brisker and more businesslike. "Very well, we won't speak of love in any sense. In any case, it's a much abused word."

"I could not agree more."

"And furthermore, Lucy, it is regard which is professionally important. If I am to continue as your lawyer and co-executor, there should be a certain mutual regard, a mutual confidence. I want you to know that you have my confidence and that I'll stand by you, whatever questions may arise."

She wondered what he was driving at. "Questions, Paul?"

He shrugged. "About the wills, perhaps."

"But what questions could there possibly be?"

He looked at her as if she were quite naïve. "My dear

Lucy, in the midst of life we are in death. Violence is our lot. Whole families are sometimes wiped out in a summer by a single fever. But consider the luck of Sabrehill. Mr. Aaron dead this summer from a fall from a horse—and he was an excellent horseman. Mr. Joel dead only a few weeks ago from drowning—apparently after a clumsy tumble into a placid river. Miss Amity killed by a cottonmouth in the plantation office—rather strange—and poor Mr. Turnage kicked to death by a horse when he went to get a doctor. Of course, Miss Amity would have departed from this vale long before Mr. Turnage returned with a doctor anyway, but never mind. The point is that these last few weeks here at Sabrehill have been reminiscent of an Elizabethan tragedy. And this is bound to cause some people to have second thoughts and eventually to ask questions. This could cause the wills to be held in probate interminably.”

Anger glowed again. In other words, Lucy thought, if you don't get what you want, you will try to cause trouble. All right, what do you want?

“Go on,” she said.

Paul held out open hands. “I am your lawyer. I suggest that you leave the entire matter to me. I'm prepared to devote my entire time to it, should that become necessary. And you know what influence the Devereaus have in the law offices and courts of this state.”

Lucy knew very well. “Obviously this would entail a great deal of special service,” she said. “What would your fee be?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” At last Paul had surprised her.

“Not . . . a . . . penny.”

“I don't understand. . . .”

“Lucy, I'm sure you know that the Devereau plantation is deeply in debt to you, thanks to my late father's financial ineptitude. We've also given up many acres and many slaves. I merely want it back in my hands, Lucy—all of it. But, as I say, you won't have to pay me a single penny.”

Lucy smiled. For some reason—she could not have said why—her anger vanished, and she found herself amused

by the man, even liking him a little once again. He was a rascal, but only trying to survive, and who could tell?—a rascal might prove useful to her.

"I'll think about it," she said.

He had survived. The bad years were truly over at last—he could believe that now—and there would be no more whips, no more running, no more threats of mutilation and death. He was virtually free. His manumission had been prepared and would be handed to him the moment he was ready to leave for the North with Dulcy.

And one morning, as he watched her chattering in the kitchen with Momma Lucinda, he sadly realized that he could not go with her.

But how could he possibly tell her? She was counting on him, planning for him, eager to dream of what their adventures would be. He kept putting off the moment.

Meanwhile, the pattern of their days changed surprisingly little. The major change was that Dulcy now spent more time in their house, making a final assortment of her belongings, choosing what to take north and what to give away. Jeb still went out into the fields each morning, though now he often went on horseback, Cheney at his side, in order to supervise as thoroughly as possible. Sabrehill lacked an overseer. Someone had to do the job. He and Cheney, as the most widely experienced men on the plantation, theoretically and practically, were the logical choices.

In the evenings, after stabling his horse, Jeb went back to the house to wash up, and he and Dulcy walked to the big-house kitchen and, out of sheer habit, ate their dinner on the west steps. Sometimes Leila or Irish joined them. A few times Lucy did, though she usually ate her dinner alone in the dining room. Afterwards, they might talk to Lucy for a time, or visit the field quarters if it was Saturday night, or return to their house to bed down and pleasure and sleep.

Dulcy planned to leave in October, soon after her birthday, and as the day grew closer, Jeb knew he could no longer delay. One evening as they lay in each other's

arms, he said the words: "Dulcy, I am not going north with you."

She raised her head from his shoulder to look at him. "What are you talking about? Of course you're going north with me."

"No. You're going alone. I'm staying here. For a time."

"But why?" she asked, bewildered. "What in the world for?"

"Well, for one thing . . . I'm needed here. A lot of people are dependent on Sabrehill. Black people who are trying to make some kind of a life, just as we are. And until your sister finds a new overseer, someone better than" He hesitated; he didn't even want to say the man's name. ". . . better than the last one, I'll have to stay here and help her. Until Sabrehill is settled down and running smoothly again."

What he said was true as far as it went, but Dulcy looked at him as if trying to discover what the whole truth might be.

"All right," she said, "I'll stay with you. There's no hurry. We can stay on for a few more weeks or even months. We can stay as long as you think is necessary."

"No."

"Jebediah, I won't leave without you."

He would have to tell her the other reason he was staying behind, he decided—the more important reason. And perhaps that was only fair.

"Dulcy, if I go north with you, we'll continue as lovers or even as man and wife—"

"We are man and wife!"

"Not yet. At least not as free people in the North. And I want you to go north alone and live as a young white woman. That's what you'll be up there, you know, at least to most people. White."

"But that's not true. I'm black now."

Jeb laughed softly. He pulled down the cover and let the lamplight strike her body. Her arms and lower legs were mahogany. Her face and neck had been burned a rich brown that speared deeply down between her breasts. But the breasts themselves, the belly, and the thighs, in contrast to his own dark body, were ivory.

"Oh, yes," Jeb said, viewing the two of them, "I had forgotten your thimbleful of black blood. Welcome to the tribe."

Pain showed in Dulcy's eyes. "Jebediah, don't make fun of me."

"I'm sorry."

"Maybe my bad time only lasted a few weeks and not all the years that yours did, but to people around here I'm black. And if I'd rather be black with you than white with them, I've got the right."

"Yes," he conceded, "you do. But be sure that that's what you really want. You may find that it's as hard to be a black man's wife up there as it is down here. And you'll want white companionship, Dulcy. The day will come when you'll want it."

Her forehead fell to his shoulder. He felt her breath against his skin.

"You're thinking I'll forget you when I get up there, aren't you, Jebediah?"

The thought was painful, but it was true. "You might. A little. Would that be so wrong?"

"Yes, it would be!"

"No. I wouldn't blame you. Dulcy, we were so lucky to find each other. Here we both were at Sabrehill, and we could reach out and touch when we needed each other. You kept me alive."

"And you gave me a reason to live, and now you're taking it away. You're trying to get rid of me."

"No. I'm so grateful to you, and I have such a love for you, that I want you to have your chance. I want you to be sure about yourself and about us. Don't cling to me from desperation, Dulcy. The time of desperation is over. You're free now, free to make a new life. Don't tie yourself to me. Not yet. Go north and find out what you really want."

"I want you!"

"Go north and find out."

And so she left, and he stood in the courtyard and watched her carriage disappear in a swirl of early morning mist. Her last words echoed in his mind: "I'll be wait-

ing . . . I'll be waiting . . . I'll be waiting. . . ." And he wondered if he would ever see her again.

"Jebediah." Miss Lucy spoke from somewhere behind him.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"She's gone."

"I know."

"You wanted to go with her, didn't you?"

What did it matter what he had wanted? He had done what had to be done. "I'd better get to work," he said tersely. "I've got a day ahead of me."

"Wait. Wait, please!"

He wanted only to be alone for a time to listen to that echo in his mind, but there was something strained and urgent in her voice, and she took his left hand and tugged at it.

When he turned to her, she was pale. She tried to smile. "It's just occurred to me," she said, "that I'm the last free white person at Sabrehill."

"Yes, ma'am."

"There's something I want to show you."

"All right."

Still holding his hand, she led him into the mansion and up the stairs.

"You're going to think I'm foolish."

"I doubt that, Miss Lucy."

She led him by the hand to the second floor, and then to the third. It was like being led by a child. There was yet another set of stairs, an iron spiral that mounted to a trap door. Lucy pushed the door open, and they climbed into the big cupola that crowned the house.

"Look," she said.

The rising sun was burning away the mist, and they could see for miles. They saw down the slope to Sabre's Landing and the river and the tree-lined shore beyond. They saw the gardens and the courtyard and the dozens of outbuildings. In the distance they saw the quarters and the vast fields. Far off on a road, Jeb saw a carriage that might have been Dulcy's, carrying her ever farther away.

"There it is," Miss Lucy said, "in all directions on this side of the river, as far as you can see. Sabrehill. Hun-

dreds of hands and thousands of acres. A little kingdom of houses and fields, cotton and food crops, loves and hates, pleasures and pains. A few people who may love us and more who must want us destroyed. You taught me something about that."

"Yes, ma'am."

The strain in her voice increased. "Sometimes I think it's all so evil, all so wicked. But it's what's here, Jebediah, it's what's here. And it depends on me, now. These people will starve or kill me or get themselves killed if I can't take care of them. And, Jebediah, I don't know anything about managing a plantation!"

"I'll help you. That's one reason I'm—"

"Jebediah, the world is getting worse! You keep hearing of hangings and burnings and riots and insurrection plots and slaves being whipped to death—all because we have this great inescapable evil! And I've got to keep such things from happening here. But I've always had Papa, and now there's only me, and I need you so much, because I don't know what to do—" The panic broke through in full force. "Jebediah, I don't know what to do!"

He hurried to her. Stepping behind her, he seized her shoulders tightly enough to hurt, then loosened his grip and stroked them. "Now, don't be frightened," he said soothingly. "Don't be frightened, Miss Lucy-child. We'll take care of it, you and I. Don't be frightened."